

Ministry of Grace Church

The Acts of The Apostles Chapter 15

Preface:

Last time, as we looked at chapter 14 in the book of Acts, we saw how much resistance Paul and Barnabas encountered from their proclamation of the Gospel message. But their response to the resistance was different than how you or I might respond. Instead of being discouraged or running away, they remained and continued to preach the Gospel for a “long time.”

In the town of Lystra, Paul healed a man who had been crippled from birth. When he did, the whole town began shouting, “The gods have come down to us in the likeness of men!” As a result, the priest of Zeus came and wanted to make a sacrifice to Zeus and Hermes (who they thought Barnabas and Paul were.) Later, those who had opposed Paul and Barnabas in Iconium and Antioch, came and stirred up the people so much that they stoned Paul.

Since Paul was not dead, as the persecutors thought, he and Barnabas continued on to Derbe. Then they headed back through the towns where they had preached and appointed elders in the new churches. Following that, they went back to Syrian Antioch and reported to the church there all that had happened.

But, now that they were back home in Antioch, they had to deal with false doctrine already beginning to creep into the church.

Question About Circumcision

Acts 15:1-4

¹But some men came down from Judea and were teaching the brothers, “Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.” ²And after Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and debate with them, Paul and Barnabas and some of the others were appointed to go up to Jerusalem to the apostles and the elders about this question. ³So, being sent on their way by the church, they passed through both Phoenicia and Samaria, describing in detail the conversion of the Gentiles, and brought great joy to all the brothers. ⁴When they came to Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the church and the apostles and the elders, and they declared all that God had done with them.

Notes:

We tend to think of the early church as being rather idyllic; opening their arms to everyone and having an undying love for each other, demonstrating these actions at their monthly love feasts. Over the past few lessons, we’ve seen the opposition that Paul and Barnabas experienced as they shared the Gospel of salvation by grace through faith. We recognize the opposition that they received from outside the church. However, we seldom stop to think about the opposition that came from within the church.

Here in the opening part of chapter 15, we see that there were some who came down from the church in Jerusalem to the church in Antioch, declaring that in order to be saved, people had to obey the Law of

Moses. Specifically, this had to do with circumcision. Paul and Barnabas argued with them, but neither side was willing to give in. As a result, the church appointed Paul and Barnabas, along with several others from the church in Antioch, to go up to Jerusalem to talk to the Apostles and Elders about the issue. Upon arriving at Jerusalem, they were well received, then Paul and Barnabas shared with them all that God had done through their ministry. This appears to have occurred at a formal “reception” for the delegation from Antioch.

The Jerusalem Council – The Discussion

Acts 15:5-12

⁵But some believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees rose up and said, “It is necessary to circumcise them and to order them to keep the law of Moses.” ⁶The apostles and the elders were gathered together to consider this matter. ⁷And after there had been much debate, Peter stood up and said to them, “Brothers, you know that in the early days God made a choice among you, that by my mouth the Gentiles should hear the word of the gospel and believe. ⁸And God, who knows the heart, bore witness to them, by giving them the Holy Spirit just as he did to us, ⁹and he made no distinction between us and them, having cleansed their hearts by faith. ¹⁰Now, therefore, why are you putting God to the test by placing a yoke on the neck of the disciples that neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear? ¹¹But we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will.” ¹²And all the assembly fell silent, and they listened to Barnabas and Paul as they related what signs and wonders God had done through them among the Gentiles.

Notes:

There were some in the Jerusalem church, former Pharisees, who also insisted that a person had to be circumcised and had to keep the Law of Moses. The text refers to them as “believers.” But were they really? In fact, the word “believers” is expressed as a perfect tense verb, indicating that they believed at some point in time in the past and, as a result, they were believers (as the ongoing effect.) This would indicate that these Pharisees were genuine believers who, unfortunately, believed in a false doctrine. This meeting at which they presented their argument appears to be different from the reception.

After much debate, the Apostle Peter stood up and addressed the subject. He reminded them that God had used him (Peter) to take the Gospel message to the Gentiles at the home of Cornelius in Caesarea (Acts chapter 10). He pointed out that these Gentiles received the Holy Spirit just as the disciples had on the Day of Pentecost. Then Peter made a curious statement. He said,

But we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will.

Notice, that he didn’t say, “they were saved, just like we were.” He was not trying to say that the believing Gentiles were just like the believing Jews, but just the opposite; believing Jews are just like believing Gentiles. The distinction is subtle, but important. His base argument was that the Gentiles were saved by faith and the Jews are just like them in that regard. In other words, not only should we not require the Gentiles to be like us Jews, but we Jews should be just like the Gentiles. To the Jewish ears, that was almost heresy!

Peter’s message was so well said and to the point that everyone was silent, possibly deep in thought about what had just been expressed so eloquently. In the midst of that silence Paul and Barnabas got up and shared with everyone the signs and wonders that God had performed among the Gentiles. This was a

clear indication that God was in favor of the work that Paul and Barnabas had been doing among the Gentiles.

The Jerusalem Council – The Conclusion

Acts 15:13-21

¹³After they finished speaking, James replied, “Brothers, listen to me. ¹⁴Simeon has related how God first visited the Gentiles, to take from them a people for his name. ¹⁵And with this the words of the prophets agree, just as it is written, ¹⁶“After this I will return, and I will rebuild the tent of David that has fallen; I will rebuild its ruins, and I will restore it, ¹⁷that the remnant of mankind may seek the Lord, and all the Gentiles who are called by my name, says the Lord, who makes these things ¹⁸known from of old.’ ¹⁹Therefore my judgment is that we should not trouble those of the Gentiles who turn to God, ²⁰but should write to them to abstain from the things polluted by idols, and from sexual immorality, and from what has been strangled, and from blood. ²¹For from ancient generations Moses has had in every city those who proclaim him, for he is read every Sabbath in the synagogues.”

Notes:

The final, summary statement was presented by James, the half-brother of our Lord. It appears that James was the leader of the Jerusalem church. Why do I say that? Remember, in Acts chapter 12, after Peter had been miraculously freed from prison by an angel, he went to Mary’s house, where there was a prayer meeting going on. Once they finally opened the gate for him, we are told,

... he described to them how the Lord had brought him out of the prison. And he said, “Tell these things to **James** and to the brothers.” Then he departed and went to another place.
(Acts 12:17)

Also, in Galatians, when Paul describes his conversion and early ministries, he said he went from Antioch up to Jerusalem where he met with only two people, Peter (Cephas) and James:

Then after three years I went up to Jerusalem to visit Cephas and remained with him fifteen days. But I saw none of the other apostles except James the Lord's brother. (Galatians 1:18-19)

Add to this the fact that James is the one who made the summary statement, which is what the leader of the church would do. Although this isn’t conclusive evidence that James was the leader of the Jerusalem church, it certainly implies it. Also, this is commonly believed by most Protestant Biblical Scholars. But, why is this so significant? In verses 13 through 21, we see that it is James who makes the summary argument, not Peter as one might expect if he had truly been the original Pope! If Peter was the Pope, the leader of the apostles appointed by Christ, he would have been the one to make the summary argument, not James.

In his summary, James compares the events of his day with a prophecy of Amos 9:11-15. This particular passage is one that describes the earthly reign of the Messiah (which we refer to as the Millennial reign of Christ). In the book of Amos, our Bible says:

that they may *possess* the remnant of *Edom* and all the nations who are called by my name,” declares the LORD who does this. (Amos 9:12)

But James said:

that the remnant of *mankind* may *seek* the Lord,

The discrepancy arises from two words. The word for Edom can also be translated as “Adam” or “mankind.” The word for “possesses” is almost identical to the word translated as “seek.” And – it appears that James is quoting the Septuagint translation (Greek version of the Old Testament) which agrees completely with what James said.

Now, as I mentioned, this passage in Amos is a description of events during the Messianic reign, not during the church age. That’s why James did not quote this passage as a prediction of the salvation of Gentiles that the new church was seeing. James simply said that the prophecy of Amos “agrees” with what was happening in the first century church.

James’ conclusion, therefore, was that since the Gentiles will definitely seek the Lord during the Messianic reign, then having the Gentiles seeking the Lord in the first century makes very good sense. There is no reason to trouble the Gentiles with circumcision since it is not mentioned in the Amos passage.

Finally, Amos is not the only prophet to predict the salvation of Gentiles. Note that in verse fifteen, James said,

And with this the words of the *prophets* agree ... (Acts 15:15)

A number of prophets predicted the salvation of Gentiles (e.g., [Isaiah 42:6](#), [Isaiah 60:3](#), and [Malachi 1:11](#).) Therefore, James’ judgment was that we should not stand in the way of the Gentiles receiving salvation. Instead, he suggested a letter should be sent to the Gentiles affirming abstinence from food polluted by idols, sexual immorality, and animals eaten without first draining the blood. These were all moral issues (not legal issues) and would keep the Gentiles from offending their Jewish brothers. In other words, the Gentiles were not to be bound under the Law of Moses, but they were to be bound under the Law of Love.

The Council's Letter to Gentile Believers

Acts 15:22-35

²²Then it seemed good to the apostles and the elders, with the whole church, to choose men from among them and send them to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas. They sent Judas called Barsabbas, and Silas, leading men among the brothers, ²³with the following letter: “The brothers, both the apostles and the elders, to the brothers who are of the Gentiles in Antioch and Syria and Cilicia, greetings. ²⁴Since we have heard that some persons have gone out from us and troubled you with words, unsettling your minds, although we gave them no instructions, ²⁵it has seemed good to us, having come to one accord, to choose men and send them to you with our beloved Barnabas and Paul, ²⁶men who have risked their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. ²⁷We have therefore sent Judas and Silas, who themselves will tell you the same things by word of mouth. ²⁸For it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to lay on you no greater burden than these requirements: ²⁹that you abstain from what has been sacrificed to idols, and from blood, and from what has been strangled, and from sexual immorality. If you keep yourselves from these, you will do well. Farewell.” ³⁰So when they were sent off, they went down to Antioch, and having gathered the congregation together, they delivered the letter. ³¹And when they had read it, they rejoiced because of its encouragement. ³²And Judas and Silas, who were themselves prophets, encouraged and strengthened the brothers with many words. ³³And after they had spent some time, they were sent

off in peace by the brothers to those who had sent them. ³⁵But Paul and Barnabas remained in Antioch, teaching and preaching the word of the Lord, with many others also.

Notes:

As a result of the discussion among the apostles and elders of the Jerusalem church and the delegation sent from the church in Antioch, they decided to send a letter back to Antioch with a summation of the recommendation that James had made. This letter was carried back by Paul and Barnabas, but they were accompanied by a couple of representatives from Jerusalem, Judas called Barsabbas, and Silas. Luke notes that these were leading men among the brothers in the Jerusalem church. The wisdom of this cannot be overstated. If there were any in Antioch who would question whether or not this was the actual decision of the council, they could ask Judas or Silas for confirmation. Also, it is likely that the “some of the others” who were mentioned in verse two were among those who originally were from the church in Antioch, saying it was necessary to be circumcised. The church in Antioch would be able to question them as well and they would be an encouragement to the Pharisees who brought the issue in the first place.

When the delegation arrived back in Antioch, they read the letter and were encouraged by it. As a result, the church rejoiced. Notice that it doesn't say that those who agreed with the decision rejoiced. The implication is that the entire church in Antioch rejoiced. Then – Judas and Silas, who were prophets, further encouraged and strengthened the church for some time.

Paul and Barnabas Separate

Acts 15:36-41

³⁶And 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.” ³⁷Now Barnabas wanted to take with them John called Mark. ³⁸But 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. ³⁹And there arose a sharp disagreement, so that they separated from each other. Barnabas took Mark with him and sailed away to Cyprus, ⁴⁰but Paul chose Silas and departed, having been commended by the brothers to the grace of the Lord. ⁴¹And he went through Syria and Cilicia, strengthening the churches.

Notes:

After the church had settled back into its routine, Paul suggested to Barnabas that they go back to the churches that had been established in Galatia to see how they were doing. Apparently, Barnabas agreed, but he wanted to take his nephew John Mark with them. If you recall, John Mark had gone with Paul and Barnabas on the first missionary trip, but he had returned home after they had gone through Cyprus. We are never told what the reason was for his return, but apparently Paul did not agree that he should accompany them on the second missionary journey.

The disagreement was so strong between Paul and Barnabas that they decided to split up and go separate ways. Barnabas took John Mark and returned to the island of Cyprus while Paul took Silas and headed north to Tarsus and then to the churches in Galatia. So, we see that church splits are not new. This split appears to be a benefit to the church as a whole because there were now two missionary teams proclaiming the Gospel message.

So What?

Legalism has been a problem in the church from the beginning. Why? Because it's difficult to live a life of faith. It's easier to have a set of rules to live by. Then, as long as you're obeying all of the rules, you know you're where God wants you to be and you know you're doing what God wants you to do, right? Well, kinda! Legalism keeps you within the boundaries of the box. The real issue comes in when we identify who has set the boundaries. Is it the church, or God, or us? And, if it's God who set the boundaries, what exactly are they? The biggest problem with legalism is that it can turn into Pharisaism. You see, the Pharisees claimed to have identified more than 600 commands that God proclaimed. Then, they spent their entire lives trying to follow all of the commands and they were so focused on the commands that they totally failed to see God even when He was performing miracles in their presence.

Walking by faith, on the other hand, is not easy. It requires several things. First of all, it requires a knowledge of who God really is. Then, it requires that we are walking in fellowship with Him. And, we can only be walking in fellowship with God when we are constantly being aware of our sins and confessing them without hesitation. It means we have to be constantly reading and studying God's Word. It means we have to have an active prayer life and a personal relationship with our Heavenly Father. It means we have to maintain an active confessional life. Then, and only then can we know what the Holy Spirit is directing us toward, or away from.

Again, let me say that a faith walk requires a knowledge of who God is. Yes, He is the creator of both the visible and the invisible world. And, intellectually, we accept that He is the King of Kings and Lord of Lords. But what does that really mean? Do you remember what Paul taught us in Romans?

... if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. (Romans 10:9)

Too many "Christians" today have confessed Jesus as Savior and ignore the fact that He is our Lord. If He is our Lord, it doesn't just mean that He is greater than we are. It means that we are His servants and we are required to do what He wants us to do. If we recognize that God is truly our Lord and master and if we truly love God then we can fulfill what Jesus said:

If you love me, you will keep my commandments. (John 14:15)

The problem comes in when we try to define what Jesus meant by "keep my commandments." Did he mean The Ten Commandments? I think that the Apostle Paul and the entire book of Romans would dispute that. Then, did he mean the more than 600 commands that the Pharisees identified? I seriously doubt that. Is it any wonder that the Pharisees failed to recognize God when He stood in their midst?

My conclusion is this. There are only two commandments of His that we have to keep. Jesus described them in Matthew chapter 24 when He was asked which is the great commandment.

And one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. "Teacher, which is the great commandment in the Law?"

And he said to him, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets." (Matthew 22:35-40)

Love the Lord - and love your neighbor. In both of these instances the Greek word translated "love" is the verb *agapaō*, that is, *agape* love. It is a verb of action, not emotion or feelings. This verb means to

act in such a way that you demonstrate you are more concerned about the good of the object of your love than about your own good. If you truly “agape love” God then you are more concerned about pleasing Him than you are about pleasing yourself. And – if you truly “agape love” your neighbor, then you are more concerned about his or her well-being than your own. If we were all to live by just these two commandments then we would all know the peace that passes all understanding (**Philippians 4:7**).

So What Else?

During the discussion about legalism that Paul and Barnabas had with the Apostles and Elders, Peter compared salvation of the Jews to salvation of the Gentiles. He said,

But we believe that we *will* be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they *will*.

Christians typically think of salvation as a past event. We usually hear salvation testimonies expressed as, “I was saved when ...” However, there are actually three aspects of our salvation, past, present, and future. And, there are really two past aspects of our salvation. Before God created the heavens and the earth, He chose us to be saved, to be holy and blameless:

even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. In love (**Ephesians 1:4**)

We’ve talked about this before. This part of the past aspect of our salvation is all God’s doing. He chose us. But – there is also something that we did in the past. Within our lifetime, if we are truly saved, sometime in the past, we believed in the Gospel message and received Jesus as our Lord and Savior. In this past aspect of our salvation, we have shared accountability with God.

Then there is the present aspect of our salvation. This is something that we are doing to, and for, ourselves right now:

Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, so now, not only as in my presence but much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you, both to will and to do for his good pleasure. (**Philippians 2:12-13**)

This verse does *not* say that we have to work for our salvation. The word translated “work-out” indicates a continual “fashioning or finishing” of something. It is also expressed in a manner that indicates something that we do to ourselves. Paul even clarifies the fact that we don’t save ourselves by our works. He tells us that it is God who works in us to decide to follow and to perform the works indicative of this salvation. Therefore, we see that even in the present aspect of our salvation there is a part that we play and a part that God plays.

Finally, there is a future aspect of our salvation. You may be surprised by the number of scripture verses that talk about our *future* salvation. Here are some of them:

Since, therefore, we have now been justified by his blood, much more we will be saved by him from the wrath of God. For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, now that we are reconciled, we will be saved by his life. (**Romans 5:9-10**)

And not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies. (**Romans 8:23**)

Besides this you know the time, that the hour has come for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we first believed. (**Romans 13:11**)

The Lord will rescue me from every evil deed and bring me safely into his heavenly kingdom. ...
(2 Timothy 4:18)

so Christ, having been offered once to bear the sins of many, will appear a second time, not to deal with sin but to save those who are eagerly waiting for him. (Hebrews 9:28)

who by God's power are being guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time. (1 Peter 1:5)

Although, in God's record book, we are already saved. The consummation of this salvation is a future event. This aspect of our salvation is when we will actually be "born again," when we are resurrected and given a new body. Then, after the Judgment Seat of Christ, Jesus will present us before the Father as holy and blameless. But there is an even greater characteristic of this future salvation than just the fact that we will be declared sinless. As part of the future aspect of our salvation we will also have something taken away from us, our sin nature! And, what a glorious day that will be!

Now What?

I'm sure that we would all love to live our lives perfectly, fulfilling the two commandments that Jesus talked about. The thing that prevents us from doing this is what we just talked about, our **sin nature**. We all have it and it trips up every single one of us. But – I'm reminded again about what God told Abram in Genesis chapter 17:

When Abram was ninety-nine years old the LORD appeared to Abram and said to him, "I am God Almighty; walk before me, and be blameless, (Genesis 17:1)

Remember, the word translated "before" could also be translated as "in my face" or, "facing me." Let's all commit to renewing our efforts to love the Lord our God with all our heart and with all our soul and with all our mind and to love our neighbor as ourselves. Then, when our sin nature causes us to trip and fall, all we have to do is stand back up, confess our sin to God, get back on the pathway and walk facing Him.

Let's pray.

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