

ACTS 15:1-35 DEBATE ARISES – THE JERUSALEM COUNCIL

Last week we wrapped up Paul's first missionary journey. Today we are going to cover a landmark event in the life of the early church – The Jerusalem Council. But before we get to the Jerusalem Council, I want to quickly, just by way of review, see how much you learned from Paul's first missionary journey.

Here's a map of it. Paul and Barnabas and John Mark started off in Antioch of Syria, the home church. Their first stop was Cyprus where Paul had his first recorded convert – Sergius Paulus, a Gentile and governor of the island. They went on to Perga where the team suffered their first setback. John Mark left and returned home. We are not told why. The team of three was now down to two. They then went up into the mountains to Pisidian Antioch. There Paul delivered his first recorded sermon in the synagogue. How was it received? Very well. They invited him back to come and teach them again. They wanted to hear more. So, the next week they all showed up. You had the normal religious crowd plus a non-religious crowd as well. The place was packed. The Jews in the synagogue became jealous of Paul. They pulled some political strings and kicked him out of town. So, down the road they went to Iconium. Things were going great. People were receiving the Gospel. But then they uncovered a plot to kill Paul. So, Paul had to leave town. They moved over to Lystra which was not that far away. In Lystra you had a totally different crowd. There was no synagogue there, just a bunch of Gentiles, pagans. There Paul healed a man who had been crippled from birth. The man leaped to his feet and the people were amazed. They began to worship Paul and Barnabas as gods. Of course, Paul didn't understand at first what was going on because of the language barrier. Then they tried to stop the people from worshipping them. At that point some Jews from Antioch and Iconium came to Lystra and stirred up the people against Paul and Barnabas. They stoned Paul, dragged him out of town and left him for dead. Nothing is recorded about Barnabas being harmed. Paul recovered from his injuries and got up. He and Barnabas left and went on to Derbe.

They had some success there and then they retraced their steps. They went back through and did some follow-up discipleship, ministering to the newly established churches, and then headed home. After their return to Antioch in Syria they gave their report to the home church. It must have been fascinating to hear from Paul and Barnabas's own mouths about all the events we just read about in Acts.

This first mission trip was the shortest of Paul's three missionary journeys. By the way he will actually have four missionary journeys (the fourth one is not recorded in the Bible). Three of his mission trips are recorded in the book of Acts. On this first trip Paul and Barnabas traveled a grand total of 1,362 miles in a year and a half – 762 miles on foot and 600 miles by ship. Just so you know. Paul remains in Antioch for a while before he goes on to his second missionary journey. During this three-year period, they have the event that we are going to read about today, the Jerusalem Council, Acts Chapter 15.

Throughout church history doctrinal debates have arisen over a wide variety of matters. You had several ecumenical councils that convened between 325 and 787 A.D. (Nicaea, Constantinople, Ephesus, etc.). These councils hammered out various doctrinal matters. Doctrinal disputes still come up today. This past summer there was a headline from the Southern Baptist Convention that was held. It said, "Southern Baptist Convention rejects controversial ban on women pastors." That was a big thing they argued about and rejected. And then in April, the Methodist Church's General Convention had to contend with the issue of LGBTQ rights. Today's churches face issues that, I'll be honest with you, 20 years ago I never dreamed they would actually be issues that we would be arguing about. But here they are. That is just the way things are today. So, these doctrinal issues are going to come up and need to be hammered out.

So, we go back to Acts Chapter 15, which is what we will be looking at today. A doctrinal issue arises. It is the first one in church history and it takes place in the year is 50 A.D. So, I want to give you a timeframe about when that was. It has been 17 years since Jesus ascended back to heaven

and the Holy Spirit came at Pentecost. First issue. First debate. You could actually see this one coming. So, let's get into the scripture...

READ Acts 15:1

Some Jerusalem believers, men who were converted Jews (the early Christians were mostly converted Jews), stir up a hornet's nest. Like most people, they don't like change. There has been a large influx of Gentile Christians into the church. The issue for these Jewish Christians is not whether or not Gentiles can be saved. That has pretty well been settled. You had that whole event in Acts Chapter 10 where Peter preached at Cornelius's house and the whole household got saved and the Holy Spirit fell on the believers there. You've had Paul and Barnabas's success – many Gentile converts on their recently-completed mission trip. Clearly Gentiles CAN be saved. There is no disputing that. The issue that has arisen is whether or not these Gentile converts should be required to follow the Mosaic Law. This is what prompts the Jerusalem Council to convene.

READ Acts 15:2

It is important to get this matter settled with the apostles and church leaders in Jerusalem. The Jerusalem Council will provide us with the New Testament pattern by which all church-related differences, doctrinal and otherwise, should be settled. You come together, lay out your arguments, discuss them in a civilized and orderly manner and try to come to some kind of resolution. That is the pattern. So, Paul and Barnabas are among several men selected by the church at Antioch to go to Jerusalem and be their spokesmen.

READ Acts 15:3-4

This is the first time since their return from their first missionary journey that Paul and Barnabas have had a chance to meet with the other apostles. So, they are sharing some of the experiences they had. At this point everybody seems to be in a good frame of mind as they convene to discuss this issue. Always a good place to start. Everyone seems to be in a good mood.

The first group to present their argument is what I will refer to as the **JUDAIZING PHARISEES**. Don't miss the significance of this – there are some Pharisees that got saved, who came to Christ. Now, doctrinally they are off, but they got saved.

READ Acts 15:5

This group is referred to in Galatians in the original Greek as "Judaizers" (Galatians 2:14). The word Judaizer comes from a Greek verb meaning "to live according to Jewish customs." These men appeal to the authority of the Old Testament and to their former traditions, which they insist are still binding. This is the same group that had earlier (not mentioned in Acts but had happened chronologically before this) had demanded that Titus, an uncircumcised Gentile whom Paul had brought with him from Antioch, be circumcised immediately if he was going to associate with Jewish Christians. Of course, Paul adamantly refused to do that (Galatians 2:3-5).

All good Jews follow strict dietary rules and religious rituals dictated by God to Moses (Leviticus among other places). They have been doing this for centuries. These Pharisees claim that, in addition to faith in Christ, a person must also follow these Jewish practices. Their position is that one must keep the Law in order to be saved. Paul and Peter and all the other apostles will argue against this.

But before we become too critical of these Judaizing Pharisees, we must understand where they are coming from. And it makes sense. In Paul's day most Jewish converts to Christianity saw themselves as good moral people who had tried to keep God's laws since their youth. And now, with all these Gentile conversions, they are being brought together with a whole bunch of Gentile Christians who are bringing with them into the church many of their immoral heathen habits and lifestyles. Someone might say, "I thought they were Christians." Remember, a person is saved just as they are. God doesn't ask us to clean up our life first, does He? You come just as you are. So, they still have some issues. There are some

deep-seeded prejudices that both the Jews and Gentiles have against each other. Like I said, you could almost see this issue coming. And it all stems from the different ways that they have been brought up, their various backgrounds.

We all know the story behind the book of First Corinthians. In the Corinthian church (we will get into this later in Acts) many Gentiles got saved. They were truly redeemed and, yet, they struggled with deeply engrained issues of worldliness. We see this in our own society today. The conservative Jewish Christians based in Jerusalem fear that the large numbers of Gentile Christians will bring into the church a lack of knowledge and lower moral standards. They don't want this to happen. The Jewish Christians, therefore, are taking it upon themselves to be the "moral police," if you will, of the church; to uphold high standards of morality. They do this by insisting that the Gentile converts be admitted into the church the same way that Gentile proselytes are admitted into Judaism – forcing them to be circumcised and to keep the external rituals of Judaism. It is what they know. It is what they are familiar with.

Now let's go to the other viewpoints. Next up is **PETER AND THE JERUSALEM APOSTLES**.

READ Acts 15:6-7a

So here we go. Everybody is listening intently as the Apostle Peter speaks...

READ Acts 15:7b-9

God has already demonstrated His acceptance of the Gentile Christians in the same way as He had accepted the Jewish Christians, by giving them the Holy Spirit. Peter is obviously referencing back to when he spoke at Cornelius's house and the Holy Spirit came. That story had been widely disseminated among the church and everybody thought it was great.

READ Acts 15:10

Peter being raised as a Jew know that the law is virtually impossible to keep. So, Peter here rebukes the Judaizing Pharisees by asking them, "Why are you doing this? It is totally unnecessary!"

READ Acts 15:11

Peter's final point is that both Jews and Gentiles are saved the same way, that is, by grace, "through the grace of the Lord Jesus," without the yoke of the law. That is pretty well stated by Peter, isn't it?

Well, next up to speak is **PAUL AND BARNABAS...**

READ Acts 15:12

They are telling their story about their missionary journey – all the things God did among the Gentiles that we just read about. You will notice here in this chapter that Paul's doctrinal position is not stated. Why not? Because his position is the same as Peter's. How do we know that? Because we have Paul's letters. There are many places I could go to, but let me quote from Paul's first letter to the Galatians. He says, "We ourselves are Jews by birth and not Gentile sinners; yet we know that a person is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ, so we also have believed in Christ Jesus, in order to be justified by faith in Christ and not by works of the law, because by works of the law no one will be justified" (Galatians 2:15-16). So, there Paul's doctrinal position laid out. Then there is that passage in Ephesians Chapter 2 that you all know: "For by grace you have been saved through faith" (Ephesians 2:8a). The reason why they don't take a lot of time in Acts Chapter 15 to lay out Paul's doctrinal position is that it is the same as Peter's position (stated back in Acts 15:11).

The danger of adding works to salvation is that it undermines God's grace. Salvation is a redemptive process NOT a reformatory process. This means that we come to GOD as we are – SINNERS. Every one of us, no matter how good we think we are, are sinners. We repent of our sin and, by faith; we accept what Jesus did for us on the cross. We depend totally on HIS power to save us. Salvation has nothing to do with us and what we

can do (other than to believe), and everything to do with HIM and what HE did. A religion based on works says, "DO THIS AND YOU SHALL LIVE." Christianity, on the other hand, says, "LIVE AND DO THIS."

So that is the position that Peter and Paul and the apostles have. It is laid out clearly throughout the New Testament. Read almost any of the letters and you will see that doctrinal position.

Next up to speak is **JAMES**.

Who is this James? If you recall from earlier in Acts, Herod had the Apostle James – who had been Jesus's disciple, John's brother and part of the inner circle of Peter, James and John – Herod had him killed. So, this is a different James. This is James, the Lord's brother (Jesus's half-brother). Church tradition says that James, the Lord's brother got saved after Jesus's resurrection. That is when he believed and started following Christ. He would later become a leader in the church. He's the one who is speaking here. This is what James says...

READ Acts 15:13-18

"Simeon" is Simon Peter. Every Bible scholar believes this is referring to the Apostle Peter. Simeon is just a Hebrew variation of Simon which was Peter's birth name. What is interesting is that Peter refers to himself as "Simeon Peter" in 2 Peter. He says, "Simeon Peter, a servant and apostle of Jesus Christ" (2 Peter 1:1). So, James is obviously talking about Peter here.

James says that Simon Peter "has related how God first visited the Gentiles." He is talking again about what happened at Cornelius's house and what Peter had just talked about. Everybody knows the story about how Peter preached the Gospel, the whole household of Cornelius (all Gentiles) got saved, and the Holy Spirit came upon them. The same thing happened there that had happened at Pentecost. Everybody remembers that. It was a big deal at the time.

“And with this the words of the prophets agree.” James then quotes out of Amos Chapter 9. He sees God’s hand at work in the lives of the Gentiles, saving them, as being in complete agreement with what the prophets of the Old Testament had foretold would happen. God said back in Old Testament times that He was going to save the Gentiles – “all the Gentiles who are called by My name.” What has happened here is fulfilling prophecy. He goes back to their scriptures. It says so in Amos. That is his whole point, that the Gentiles will become a part of God’s redeemed family.

They have all presented their viewpoints and now comes time to make the decision. James, acting as the leader of the Jerusalem church and the one presiding over the Jerusalem Council, now renders the council’s final decision on this very important issue. Here is **THE DECISION**...

READ Acts 15:19-21

So, what is James saying. He is saying that the Gentile converts do not need to be circumcised. However, to address the concerns of the Pharisees, James requests that the Gentile Christians, for the sake of unity, refrain from any practices that their Jewish brothers might find offensive. He mentions some specific things that he knew were upsetting to the Jews: (1) eating things contaminated by idols, (2) sexual immorality, and (3) eating food that was not prepared according to the Jewish Law (Leviticus 17 and 18). Here’s the idea behind that: “You Gentiles may not have an issue with doing these things, but you need to be considerate of your Jewish brothers who do.” No requirement for circumcision is included. But there are some things that he is asking these Gentile believers to do for the sake of unity.

READ Acts 15:22-23a

Before I get to the letter itself, there are these two other guys besides Paul and Barnabas that take this letter to Antioch. We don’t know anything about Judas other than what is mentioned in this chapter. He is a relatively unknown character. Next week we will find out more about Silas. He will become Paul’s new missionary companion as we will find out.

Well, here is the wording of this letter in keeping with the decision that was made...

READ Acts 15:23b

The letter begins with traditional greetings. The letter is from the brothers (apostles and elders) to the Gentile brothers in Antioch and Syria and Cilicia.

READ Acts 15:24

The council refutes the statements made by the Judaizing Pharisees to the church at Antioch. This is what had started this whole thing and got everybody so stirred up in the first place. This is what had prompted the council. They are letting them know that "These men did not speak for us. They were on their own." They made it clear that those individuals who had said all that had not been sanctioned by the Jerusalem apostles.

READ Acts 15:25-26

The council recognizes that the church at Antioch's own Paul and Barnabas are men that they hold in high esteem. They are dynamic witnesses with proven character who have risked their lives for the Gospel. In this letter they are putting in a good word for Paul and Barnabas and emphasizing their respect for them.

READ Acts 15:27-29

The council lists basic requirements for Gentile Christian conduct in regard to their fellowship with their Jewish brethren, such as abstaining from certain kinds of foods. By doing this it will preserve church unity. The letter ends with one word – "Farewell."

Notice something stated in v 28. This is very important. "For it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us..." They really feel that their decision was not just their opinion, but was Holy Spirit directed.

"...to lay on you no greater burden than these requirements." This is what we really want you to do. Don't do the things that are going to offend

your Jewish brothers when you are around them. Paul will later talk about this in a couple of his letters.

READ Acts 15:30-31

The Jerusalem Council's letter is delivered to the church at Antioch. How does the church respond? Are they happy? Yes! Of course they are. "When they had read it, they rejoiced." These Gentile believers are encouraged by the conclusions the council reached. They realize that they (the Gentile converts in Antioch, Syria and Cilicia) are legitimate members of God's family and, as such, they are going to be treated the same as the Jewish believers. That is what they wanted to hear. Saved the same way. All rights and privileges the same.

READ Acts 15:32-35

V 34 is shown in brackets in the ESV (the version I use) because it does not appear in the older (earliest) manuscripts. Some translations will put it in as a footnote. Some leave it out altogether. I believe that it was added later to link the reader to Silas's soon-to-be connection to Paul. As you can see it doesn't really change the basic meaning of the text, so the verse was left in and put it in brackets.

Our lesson has a happy ending, doesn't it? You have this council, this disagreement, you have a happy ending and everything is good. A resolution was reached. But frankly, not all Christian disputes can be settled. This is what we read before we even get out of Acts Chapter 15: "And there arose a sharp disagreement, so that they separated from each other" (Acts 15:39). When you get into a dispute with someone and you cannot come to a resolution, sometimes what is best for unity and for peace is just to go your separate ways. There is nothing wrong with that. We will talk more about that next time.

Here are some really important take-aways from this chapter...

- Salvation comes by grace through faith in Jesus Christ. Our works do not save us. This is a consistent message throughout the New Testament.
- The Jerusalem Council shows us that Christians can disagree (even over matters of doctrine) and still maintain their unity in Christ. Even the way we go about resolving our differences should bring glory to God.
- When disagreements arise (they are inevitable), discuss them; pray about it; seek wisdom from the Holy Spirit in order to find resolution.
- Remember that God has given us His holy Word (the Bible) to guide us. In its pages we find the principles needed to make wise decisions that align with God's will. So then, we have two things we rely on for guidance: God's Word and the Holy Spirit.