

Acts Chapter 15 Continued

In the previous lesson, there had come up a dispute about whether the Gentile believers should be required to keep the Law of Moses and be circumcised or not. Peter listened to their arguments, and then stood up and settled the whole thing by stating, that if God accepted these Gentiles as they were, who were they to question God's judgment?

Acts 15:12 "Then all the multitude kept silence, and gave audience to Barnabas and Paul, declaring what miracles and wonders God had wrought among the Gentiles by them."

“Barnabas and Paul”: They delivered the second speech in which they recounted the work of God on their just completed first missionary journey among Gentiles.

“Miracles and wonders” (see note on 2:19).

We see here, that the voice of authority has spoken and all the arguing stopped. This opened the way for Paul and Barnabas to tell of their missionary journey to Derbe, Pamphylia, and other places, and how those who had never before heard the gospel message received Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior.

The most exciting part was that Gentiles, who had been worshipping the false goddess Dianna, had believed Paul and Barnabas' report of Jesus and had come to the one true God. Paul told of the miracle of healing the lame man, but also told of the persecution as well.

Acts 15:13 “And after they had held their peace, James answered, saying, Men [and] brethren, hearken unto me:”

“James” was the half-brother of Jesus and so grew up in a carpenter’s home in Nazareth (Matt. 13:55). Like his brothers he did not believe in Jesus as Lord until the end of Christ’s earthly ministry (John 7:1-5).

He delivers the third speech in defense of salvation by faith alone by relating how God’s future plans for Gentile salvation agree with His current work.

But following the resurrection of Jesus he witnessed a special appearance of Jesus (1 Cor. 15:7), experienced Pentecost (1:14), and became the leader of the Jerusalem church throughout most of the period of Acts (verse 13; 21:18). Paul referred to him as a “pillar” and acknowledged his prominence in the Jerusalem fellowship (Gal. 2:9, 12).

He later became known as “The Just” because of his fervent piety, which won the respect of Christian and Jew alike. James authored one of the earliest books of the New Testament (Epistle of James), and sent it to the believing Jews who had been scattered from their homeland. Josephus, the first-century Jewish historian, stress that James was martyred about A.D. 62.

This is not John, the apostle's brother, James. He had already been killed for the gospel. This is the half-brother of Jesus by Mary. James seemed to be highly thought of in the church, even though he did not accept Jesus as his Savior and Lord until after Jesus rose from the grave. He commands their attention in the above verse.

Acts 15:14 "Simeon hath declared how God at the first did visit the Gentiles, to take out of them a people for his name."

"A people for his name" (see notes on chapters 10 and 11; Mal. 2:2, 5; 3 John 7).

We see here, James calling Peter, Simeon. In Scripture after Scripture, we are told that a thing is established by two witnesses: and this is your second witness here regarding salvation for the Gentiles also.

Verses 15-17: James's use of Amos's prophecy (Amos 9:11-12), concerning "Gentiles" in God's kingdom does not equate the church with the messianic kingdom, making them one. James does not say that the church is fulfilling the prophecy but that what is happening in the church does "agree" with what will happen later in the kingdom.

James further clarifies this point by changing Amos's words "in that day" to "after this." By which he may suggest that after the church age God will restore the kingdom, wherein the redeemed Gentiles will fully share God's blessing.

Verses 15-17: James quotes Amos' prophecy (9:11-12), of the millennia kingdom to prove that Gentile salvation was not contrary to God's plan for Israel. In fact, in the kingdom God's messengers will announce salvation to the Gentiles (Zech. 8:20-23).

Acts 15:15 "And to this agree the words of the prophets; as it is written,"

James reminds them here, that this was even prophesied by the Old Testament prophets.

Acts 15:16 "After this I will return, and will build again the tabernacle of David, which is fallen down; and I will build again the ruins thereof, and I will set it up:"

James tells them, here, of the promise the Lord had made. This I will return, is speaking of Jesus' return.

Acts 15:17 "That the residue of men might seek after the Lord, and all the Gentiles, upon whom my name is called, saith the Lord, who doeth all these things."

“Gentiles ... whom my name is called”: James’ point is that Amos makes no mention of Gentiles becoming Jewish proselytes. If Gentiles can be saved without becoming Jews in the kingdom, there is no need for Gentiles to become proselytes in the present age.

Residue means those remaining. In this instance, here, it is speaking of the non-Jew. The salvation of Jesus Christ is offered to whosoever will. Not to just a chosen few, but to all. The statement "...upon whom my name is called..." mean the Christians, followers of Christ who have taken on His name.

Acts 15:18 "Known unto God are all his works from the beginning of the world."

God's foreknowledge of everything from the beginning of the world unto the end of the world is spoken of here. This reception of the Lord by the Gentiles is no shock to God. He knew it would happen from the beginning.

Acts 15:19 "Wherefore my sentence is, that we trouble not them, which from among the Gentiles are turned to God:"

“We trouble not them”: The Greek word for “trouble” means “to throw something in the path of someone to annoy them.” The decision of the Jerusalem Council, after considering all the evidence, was that keeping the law and observing rituals were not requirements for salvation. The Judaizers were to cease troubling and annoying the Gentiles.

We see here James saying, my decision is that we not trouble these Gentiles who have come to God. God foretold it; they received the Holy Ghost just as we did, now let us not mess with God's decision.

Acts 15:20 "But that we write unto them, that they abstain from pollutions of idols, and [from] fornication, and [from] things strangled, and [from] blood."

James and the other leaders did not want the Gentiles to revel in their freedom in Christ, which could cause the Jewish believers to follow that same liberty and violate their consciences. So James proposed that the Gentiles abstain from 4 pagan, idolatrous practices that were violations of the Law of Moses so as not to offend Jews.

“Abstain from pollutions of idols”: Food offered to pagan gods and then sold in temple butcher shops. Because idolatry was so repulsive to Jews and forbidden by God (Exodus 20:3; 34:17; Deut. 5:7), they would avoid anything to do with idols, including meat offered to idols (1 Cor. 8: 1-13).

“Fornication”: Sexual sins in general, but particularly the orgies associated with the worship of pagan gods. The Gentiles were to avoid being offensive to Jewish sensibilities in their marriages and any relationship with the opposite sex.

“From things strangled and from blood”: Dietary restrictions (Gen. 9:4; Lev. 3:17; 7:26; 17:12-14; 19:26; Deut. 12:16, 23; 15:23; 1 Sam. 14:34; Ezek. 33:25).

Though redeemed Gentiles are not under the Mosaic Law, four restrictions are placed upon them. These are not the usual four prohibitions preached during the twentieth century, but they were amazingly comprehensive and were important to the first-century church. They involve religious, moral, and physical purity. They also concern the primary element separating Jews from Gentiles, dietary regulations.

These principles did much to remove offensive practices without establishing legalism. Paul more appropriately enunciates two timeless principles for governing Christian conduct apart from the Law:

(1) Live by love.

(2) Live by the Holy Spirit (Gal. 5:13-16).

James gives a code for church membership behavior here. Don't mess around with idols of any kind, if you are a Christian. Fornication is sin of the body of every kind. This special warning against all body sin should be heeded by all Christians.

Under this sin are homosexuals, or lesbians, or adulterers, etc. Christians are not to drink or eat blood. These are so simple and so few restrictions, yet many people seem to not be able to keep even these few.

Acts 15:21 "For Moses of old time hath in every city them that preach him, being read in the synagogues every sabbath day."

James is saying here, if they want to become a Jew and live by Moses' law, they can find that in the synagogue. To me, James is saying here, that there is a separation of Moses' law and God's grace. You cannot have both. Choose one or the other. To live by the law would make you a Jew. To live by grace makes you a Christian.

Acts 15:22 "Then pleased it the apostles and elders, with the whole church, to send chosen men of their own company to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas; [namely], Judas surnamed Barsabas, and Silas, chief men among the brethren:"

“Judas”: Nothing more is known about him except that he was a prophet (verse 32).

“Silas,” who was also called Silvanus, was Paul’s coworker along with Timothy on the second missionary journey. He traveled with Paul through Syria, Asia Minor and Europe (Macedonia and Greece). At the end of the second missionary journey when Paul leaves Corinth, Silas appears to remain behind and is not mentioned again in Acts (see note on verse 40).

From what is recorded in Acts we know that Silas was a leading member of the Jerusalem church (verse 22), a prophet (verse 32), and probably a Roman citizen (16:37-39). The man whom Paul call Silvanus (1 Thess. 1:1; 2 Thess. 1:1; 2 Cor. 1:19), is likely the same man whom Luke in Acts calls Silas (a contracted form of Silvanus).

Silas had ministered with Paul and Timothy in Thessalonica (17:4), and in Corinth (18:5). Very probably the Silvanus involved with Peter in the writing or sending of this first epistle (1 Peter 5:12), is the same man. (Acts 15:22; Acts chapters 16 – 18).

It seemed to be by unanimous decision that the apostles and elders decided to accept Peter and James' decision on the matter of the Gentiles. We see here, a committee chosen of the elect men in the group to go and carry this good news of the church's decision to the church at Antioch.

Perhaps, Judas surnamed Barsabas and Silas went to assure the people of Antioch that this was not just Paul and Barnabas' decision, but was also Peter and James' decision, as well. This is the Antioch where the followers of Jesus were first called Christians, and there were many Gentile converts here. Remember, the church is still being formed here.

Acts 15:23 "And they wrote [letters] by them after this manner; The apostles and elders and brethren [send] greeting unto the brethren which are of the Gentiles in Antioch and Syria and Cilicia:"

“In Antioch and Syria and Cilicia”: Antioch was the capital of Syria and Cilicia, which was administered as a single Roman district. The churches in Cilicia were probably founded by Paul when he went there after fleeing Jerusalem (9:30).

These letters were written to these churches as a sort of doctrine of the church. These letters were to settle the discussion of keeping the Law of Moses and of circumcision. Notice this letter is addressed to the Gentile believers.

Acts 15:24 "Forasmuch as we have heard, that certain which went out from us have troubled you with words, subverting your souls, saying, [Ye must] be circumcised, and keep the law: to whom we gave no [such] commandment:"

“Troubled ... subverting”: “Troubling”, or disturbed which is a different Greek word from the one (in verse 19), meaning “to deeply upset,” “to deeply trouble,” “to perplex,” or “to create fear”. The Greek word for “unsettling” was used in extrabiblical writings to speak of someone going bankrupt. Together these words aptly describe the chaos caused by the Judaizers.

We see again here, that this letter is to straighten out a misunderstanding. This letter is saying, that whoever required you to do these things, was not speaking for the apostles and church leaders. Don't be troubled by this, because it is not the Christian's doctrine.

Acts 15:25 "It seemed good unto us, being assembled with one accord, to send chosen men unto you with our beloved Barnabas and Paul,"

This is showing that this doctrine is not just Paul and Barnabas', but the whole churches. These representatives of the main body support the fact that keeping the Mosaic Law and circumcising the men is not the doctrine of Christianity.

Acts 15:26 "Men that have hazarded their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ."

“Hazarded their lives for”: On the first missionary journey, they faced persecution (13:50), and Paul was nearly killed (14:19-20).

This is speaking of men like Paul who have gone and preached the gospel, even in the face of death. Just as Paul had been stoned, and left for dead, and then went right back to the same area to preach again. They felt it an honor to be crucified with Jesus.

Acts Chapter 15 Continued Questions

1. What was the dispute that Paul and Barnabas had with the other leaders?
2. What did Peter explain that he believed in verse 11?
3. In verse 12, what had God done among the Gentiles?
4. When did all the arguing stop?
5. In verse 13, what did James say?
6. Which James is this?
7. Who is Simeon?
8. Who had agreed in the Old Testament that the Gentiles should be accepted?
9. Residue means what?
10. What is the tabernacle called in verse 16?
11. Who does "...upon whom my name is called..." mean?
12. Known unto _____ are all his works from the beginning of the world.
13. In verse 19, James says not to trouble whom?
14. What were they to write to them (three things)?
15. What was read in the synagogue every Sabbath?
16. Who did the apostles and elders send with Paul and Barnabas?
17. Where, in verse 23, are three specific places the Gentiles are mentioned?
18. What did they try to put on the Gentiles that Peter and the others had not commanded?

19. This doctrine of grace had been approved of whom?

20. Verse 26 tells of the devotion of these men that were sent, what showed their devotion?