

>>>>>> Acts - Lesson 25 <<<<<<<

- 1) Let's jump in and start with rereading the introductory passage to the Jerusalem Council once more.

Acts 15:1–4 (NIV)

- 2) As we discussed last time, we are back at the circumcision problem – can't be saved unless you are circumcised.
 - a) The key issue is tying circumcision to salvation.
 - b) Circumcision is not a requirement for salvation which is what the issue was in Antioch.
- 3) I would also like to read again the comment that was really clarifying in this ongoing effort to understand where these "Judaizers" were coming from.

The Judaizers concluded that Christianity was not intended to **bypass** Judaism but to **build** on it. Judaism, with its centuries of history and tradition, was the prerequisite. They saw Jesus (and his message) as the final step in the long process. The Judaizers were afraid that soon there would be more Gentile than Jewish Christians. Also, they were afraid that moral standards among believers would be weakened if they did not follow Jewish laws.¹⁷

- 4) As N.T. Wright points out, this is not simply a matter of whose right or wrong.
- 5) The truth is that we are dealing with is God's "new" (if you want to call it that) reality.
 - a) That reality was the fact that the Gentiles were part of God's plan and now on equal footing with the people of Israel – a fact that they had missed completely.
- 6) There is obviously **no** resolution among the parties in Antioch by themselves.
- 7) They must get some input and frankly I think the point is they must argue their case before the apostles in Jerusalem in order to have any hope of a real resolution.
- 8) So, off to Jerusalem to get the matter resolved – the famous (not in their time) but to us, Jerusalem Council.
- 9) Before we address all that, there is a background thing happening here in these verses that is also interesting and probably has a definite bearing on the outcome.
 - a) If we step back and take notice before the onset of this situation the only folks who really know of the 1st missionary journey and the successes Paul and Barnabas had among the Gentiles are the folks in Antioch.
 - b) Also, as we are told, the folks along the journey route as they traveled through Phoenicia and Samaria.

¹⁷ Bruce Barton et al., [*Life Application New Testament Commentary*](#) (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale, 2001), 524–525.

- c) It seems that it is only on this trip that the word is spread further.
 - d) And, of special note, this would also appear to be the first time the apostles and elders in Jerusalem have heard of this particular success.
 - e) We are perhaps looking at as much as 3 years passing since Saul and Barnabas came to Jerusalem from Antioch with the famine relief.
- 10) So, it would seem like the first order of business is to let the church and apostles and elders in Jerusalem know what has been happening across Galatia and in Antioch.
- a) If you think about this in a big picture mode, you can see that the answer to the question that is about to be posed will have far reaching consequences.
 - b) If the council decides to agree with the group that had come to Antioch then not only will the church at Antioch be affected, indeed, all the churches that Paul and Barnabas have started will be affected.
 - c) It appears that the telling of the successes etc. actually takes place twice.
 - i) First, in verse 4 of the passage we just read:
- ⁴ When they came to Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the church and the apostles and elders, to whom they reported everything God had done through them.
- ii) Then, in in the middle of the discussions – 15:12 which we will get to shortly.
- 11) At this point we should probably address another one of those “scholarly issues” which you can file away for future use.
- 12) Some scholars are of the opinion that the trip to Jerusalem in Gal 2 is the Jerusalem Council.
- a) Others see Paul’s discussions in Gal 2 as referring to something else that happened when Paul and Barnabas brought the offering for famine relief to Jerusalem from Antioch.
- 13) If you are using the NASB, and you look at Gal 2, you will find the heading for the chapter to read “The Council at Jerusalem”.
- 14) Other translations have different headings there.
- a) Keep in mind, ALL these headings are supplied for our benefit by the translators and are NOT part of the original text.
 - b) Examples are:
 - i) NIV / ESV – Paul Accepted by the Apostles
 - ii) CSB – Paul Defends His Gospel and Jerusalem
 - iii) NET – Confirmation from the Jerusalem Apostles
- 15) On this point, I do NOT agree with the NASB – I do **not** think Gal 2 is referring to the Jerusalem Council.
- a) There are several reasons for this:
 - i) Galatians only mentions two trips to Jerusalem.
 - (1) Acts mentions 3.
 - ii) Galatians says they went as a result of a revelation.

- (1) I believe this refers to Agabus and the famine revelation.
- iii) In Galatians Paul presents his gospel privately to those esteemed leaders.
- iv) At the council:
 - (1) On arrival, they share with the church and all the apostles and elders. Vs 15:4
 - (2) Then in the council again they share with all the leaders and apostles. Vs 15:12
 - (3) Both (1) and (2) are very public.
- v) In Galatians, it appears that whatever debate is had, it is because Paul started it.
- vi) At the council, the debate was already going on – that was the whole purpose.
- vii) In the Galatian account, Paul and Barnabas are central and the “righthand of fellowship” is extended to them. The outcome is directed to them and the result is about Paul’s continuing ministry.

Galatians 2:9–10 (NASB 2020)

⁹ and recognizing the grace that had been given to me, James and Cephas and John, who were reputed to be pillars, gave to me and Barnabas the right hand of fellowship, so that we *might go* to the Gentiles, and they to the circumcised. ¹⁰ *They only asked* us to remember the poor—the very thing I also was eager to do.

- viii) At the conclusion of the council, the result is a letter to the church at Antioch with some very specific instructions. Truly, a different problem is solved.
 - ix) What happens with Peter at Antioch after the Galatian report of the Jerusalem meeting would likely not have taken place after the Jerusalem Council. Same with Barnabas being drawn into the hypocrisy.
- 16) The major point of difference to consider in context is the difference in the situation after the first missionary journey as opposed to before.
- a) Before this, there were not so many Gentiles converted as now.
 - b) They were not so widespread either.
- 17) We should also notice that Paul’s participation in the actual discussion of the council (as reported by Luke anyway) is really minimal.
- a) Again, 15:12 which we will get to shortly is the only mention of Paul and Barnabas participation in the council proper.

Questions / Comments before we move on?

- 1) Ok, looking at the next couple of verses, we get into the real crux of the problem at this moment.

Acts 15:5–6 (NIV)

- 2) The first thing to notice is that this is indeed a step beyond the circumcision question that was originally raised.
 - a) In Antioch, the question was one of circumcision (or at least that is what Luke reports)
 - i) And, that circumcision was a matter of salvation.

- b) Here, we have an added requirement – keeping the Law of Moses!
 - i) And again one would have to assume the requirement would be linked to salvation.
- 3) One commentator makes the point that this group of believers who stood up at the beginning may not have been exactly all of the same mind:

Probably some were sincere believers in the resurrection of Christ and his claim to be the Messiah (though obviously confused about the relationship between law and grace). Others likely were blindly trusting in their own moralistic efforts to make them acceptable to God. Still others may have been infiltrators with evil motives. Whatever these believers' individual status before God, the common concern of all in the Judaizer camp was that all Gentile converts **be required to follow the law of Moses**, especially regarding circumcision.¹⁸

- 4) Ok looking at the start of this again, we first hear from Peter then from James the brother of Jesus.

Acts 15:5–21 (NIV)

- 1) The first thing we see that we must take note of is “after much discussion”.
 - a) An absolute given here is this is not a unanimous decision.
 - b) There are folks on both sides of the issue and the discussion most likely got pretty heated and deep.
 - c) And, as we will also see, even after this council resolution, the issue will plague the church throughout its infancy.
- 2) With that being said, we need to look at what Peter and James have to say.
- 3) There are two major points here – **first from Peter**:
- 4) Peter ties back to his first being sent to the Gentile Cornelius and his household.
 - a) Here we need to remember that there were several things about that situation that have great importance to this entire conversation.
 - b) As Peter points out, the major item is that the Gentiles received the Holy Spirit “as they had” and as you recall, even before Peter had completed his message.
 - c) Then, before that, we must also remember how that entire episode began.
 - i) In a vision, Peter was shown that God no longer considered unclean many of the things which the Jews had for centuries considered unclean and unacceptable to eat.

¹⁸ Bruce Barton et al., [*Life Application New Testament Commentary*](#) (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale, 2001), 525.

- d) In the question at hand, this has a major impact – to keep the Law of Moses would require everyone who was a Christian to return to those dietary laws that were in essence set aside in Peter's vision.
 - e) He further states in vs. 10 regarding the Law in its entirety,
“a yoke that neither we nor our ancestors have been able to bear”.
 - f) The key here is the realization that it was not the Law that was unreasonable, it was man's failure – his absolute inability – to keep it that was the failure.
 - g) Bottom line is, for Peter, Gentile acceptance was a given.
- 5) Barnabas and Paul then address the council and explain where their ministry is and what has been accomplished by the Lord.
- a) Even though they had been over this before (when they first arrived) they probably felt it was necessary here as a refocusing point before any final decisions were made.
 - b) Again, any decision that was made would have a major impact on all the new gentile believers.
- 6) Finally, **James speaks** up and brings to the forefront the fact that prophies speak of this very fact.
- a) As we have discussed just a bit ago, this goes all the way back to Genesis.
 - b) Wright comments here on James' use of Amos 9:11-15

James goes for the centre of the passage and draws the conclusion that the Gentiles are indeed welcome as they are, on the basis of God's grace and with faith in Jesus as their only badge of membership.¹⁹

- 7) James makes one final point here which we need to consider.

²¹ For the law of Moses has been preached in every city from the earliest times and is read in the synagogues on every Sabbath.

- 8) In other words, both Jew and Gentile can hear and learn the Law of Moses every Sabbath in the synagogue.
- 9) This is pertinent for several reasons assuming that the Gentiles were attending synagogue meetings:
 - a) First, they would not become morally destitute as though they were left on their own without any knowledge of what God considered morally correct.
 - b) Second, it would give these new converts a true respect for their Jewish Christian Brothers.
 - c) Even if they were not attending directly we would know that the elders that were chosen by Paul and Barnabas in all these churches would be sharing that morality with these new

¹⁹ Tom Wright, [*Acts for Everyone, Part 2: Chapters 13-28*](#) (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 2008), 45.

converts – which – stems from the teaching that has been taking place the synagogues for centuries.

- 10) Basically, James and Peter are singing the same song as Paul and Barnabas – and that is that this returning to the Law at the level which it is being suggested cannot be allowed to happen.
- 11) If you have been reading Galatians along as Micah has requested, I am sure you are hearing in your mind right now how appalled Paul is that the Galatians are trying to go back and start keeping the Law of Moses.
 - a) For the gentiles to whom he is speaking it is not them necessarily trying to be “Jewish first” but rather as Paul points out in chapter 4:8-11 they are trying to become slaves again.

Galatians 4:8–11 (NASB 2020)

⁸ However at that time, when you did not know God, you were slaves to those which by nature are not gods. ⁹ But now that you have come to know God, or rather to be known by God, how is it that you turn back again to the weak and worthless elementary principles, to which you want to be enslaved all over again? ¹⁰ You meticulously observe days and months and seasons and years. ¹¹ I fear for you, that perhaps I have labored over you in vain.

- i) They were slaves to worship of idols before and to turn to the Law would make them slaves to it as surly as they were slaves to those idols before.
- b) For the Jews who read the Galatian letter, he is probably saying that they would be come slaves to the Law again – the Law that he has clearly stated cannot be kept in its entirety and which does not lead to redemption and eternal life.