

THE LIFE OF THE APOSTLE PAUL

THE COUNCIL AT JERUSALEM MEETS, ACTS 15:1-21

- A. A conflict arose in Antioch concerning the message of the Gospel (1-2)
1. Some men from Judea came to Antioch to teach that a person must be circumcised to be saved (1), ***But 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."***
 - a. Men from Judea went to Syrian Antioch to teach (around 49 A.D.)
 - 1) They were not sent by the church in Jerusalem.
 - 2) They may be the ones referred to in Galatians 2:12, *For before certain men came from James, he was eating with the Gentiles; but when they came he drew back and separated himself, fearing the circumcision party.*
 - b. They insisted that salvation requires circumcision.
 - 1) Kenneth Gangel, *Since Christianity was just a messianic branch of Judaism at this time, why should the rules change? Why should they back away from requiring circumcision and the keeping of the Mosaic law?...The Judaizers failed to realize (or refused to see) that God had changed the rules.*
 - 2) The men were probably still upset by Peter's visit to Cornelius and now they felt like they had to deal with the issue of the first missionary journey.
 - c. They even persuaded Peter when he was in Antioch to withdraw from fellowship with Gentile Christians, Galatians 2:14, *But when I saw that their conduct was not in step with the truth of the gospel, I said to Cephas before them all, "If you, though a Jew, live like a Gentile and not like a Jew, how can you force the Gentiles to live like Jews?"*
 - d. Standing for the truth is much more important than worrying about what people think of you.
 2. Paul and Barnabas refuted their teaching (2a), ***And after Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and debate with them,***
 - a. The ministry of Paul and Barnabas was under attack, actually the Gospel was under attack.
 - 1) The Judeans were teaching a different message, Jesus plus circumcision.
 - 2) The message of Paul and Barnabas was Jesus plus nothing.
 - b. They rejected the teaching of the Judeans.
 - 1) *no small dissension*, the word means to riot, to have strife and discord.
 - 2) The two points of view were strongly debated.
 - 3) A. T. Robertson, *Paul and Barnabas showed themselves equal to this great occasion by seeing at once that the very essence of Christianity was at stake.*
 3. The church at Antioch appointed a team to address the issue in Jerusalem (2b), ***Paul and Barnabas and some of the others were appointed to go up to Jerusalem to the apostles and the elders about this question.***
 - a. The church sent Paul, Barnabas, and other leaders to address the matter.
 - b. The meeting was held with the apostles and elders in Jerusalem.
 - c. The message of the Gospel is at the center of our Christian faith.
- B. Paul and Barnabas shared their ministry (3-5)
1. They went through Phoenicia and Samaria recounting how Gentiles came to faith (3), ***So, 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.***
 - a. Paul and Barnabas shared with those in Phoenicia and Samaria what God had done in bringing Gentiles to faith.
 - b. The believers rejoiced in what God did in Cyprus and Asia Minor even as He had done for them.
 - c. Kenneth Gangel, *Having to travel approximately 250 miles, the Antioch party headed south. They may very well have taken a month as they made a leisurely journey, interrupted by visits to groups of Christians along the way.*

2. They arrived at the church in Jerusalem (4), *When 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.*
 - a. The group from Antioch were welcomed by the church in Jerusalem.
 - b. Paul and Barnabas proclaimed what God had accomplished.
 - 1) It was God’s initiative to save Gentiles apart from Judaism.
 - 2) It was the message they had shared in Antioch, Acts 14:27, *And when they arrived and gathered the church together, they declared all that God had done with them, and how he had opened a door of faith to the Gentiles.*

3. Some at the church in Jerusalem disputed the testimony of Paul and Barnabas (5), *But 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.”*
 - a. Some believers in Christ who were Pharisees repeated the necessity of being circumcised.
 - b. They added another requirement, keeping the law of Moses, Galatians 5:3, *I testify again to every man who accepts circumcision that he is obligated to keep the whole law.*
 - c. Kenneth Gangel, *We dare not confuse the Ten Commandments with the law of Moses. From our perspective we often view those two as one, but they were not. The New Testament never argues that Christians should not pay attention to the Ten Commandments, though certainly they will never lead to salvation. This argument was not about that. It dealt with the ritualistic practices of the Jews which set them apart from other people—circumcision, food laws, and other guidelines for living.*
 - d. Opposition comes when we truthfully proclaim the message of the Gospel.

- C. The church at Jerusalem convened to discuss the meaning of the Gospel (6-21)
 1. The council was composed of the apostles and elders (6), *The apostles and the elders were gathered together to consider this matter.*
 - a. Some considered this to be a closed meeting consisting of the apostles, elders of the church in Jerusalem, and the group from Antioch.
 - b. Others believed the proceedings were open to all church members who chose to attend.

 2. Peter sided with Paul and Barnabas (7-11)
 - a. He recounted how God had used him to proclaim the Gospel to Gentiles who then believed (7-9)
 - 1) He reminded them of Cornelius and their acceptance that it was the work of God (7), *And 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.*
 - a) Both sides of the issue were presented and debated.
 - b) Peter stood up and reminded everyone present of God’s work in the life of the Gentile Cornelius, Acts 10:1 - 11:18.
 - 1] This event took place more than 10 years before.
 - 2] It was a story of God’s choosing Gentiles for salvation.
 - 3] Salvation was based on hearing the Gospel message and believing in the person and work of Christ.
 - 2) God confirmed the work by giving them the Holy Spirit (8), *And God, who knows the heart, bore witness to them, by giving them the Holy Spirit just as he did to us,*
 - a) God knew they placed their faith in Christ because God is *the heart-knower*, Acts 1:24, *And they prayed and said, “You, Lord, who know the hearts of all, show which one of these two you have chosen.*
 - b) He confirmed it by giving them and Jews the Holy Spirit based on placing faith in Christ.
 - c) Richard Lenski, *The point to be noted is that God gave these Gentiles the same attestation that he had given to the apostles themselves and to the first believers.*
 - 3) He did not make a distinction between Jew and Gentile but cleansed their hearts by faith (9), *and he made no distinction between us and them, having cleansed their hearts by faith.*
 - a) Jews and Gentiles became Christians in exactly the same way, by faith in Christ.
 - b) God cleansed their hearts based on faith in Christ plus nothing.

- c) For God, spiritual cleansing does not take place on the outside, but on the inside, in the heart.
 - d) Cleansing that is acceptable to God does not take place on the outside but on the inside, in the heart.
- b. He asked those who demanded circumcision why they were testing God (10-11)
- 1) He declared that they were trying to place on Gentiles a burden that Jews had never been able to bear (10), ***Now, 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?***
 - a) The issue was not that Paul and Barnabas were changing the rules of salvation but it was the Judaizers.
 - b) They were putting God to the test by seeing how far they could go with their opinions, Deuteronomy 6:16, *You shall not put the LORD your God to the test, as you tested him at Massah.*
 - c) They were attempting to put an unbearable burden on Gentiles which even Jews could not bear.
 - 1] The yoke was the Mosaic Covenant which the nation of Israel was never able to obey, Matthew 23:4, *They tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on people's shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to move them with their finger.*
 - 2] Jesus declared that He is the true yoke, *Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.*
 - 3] I. Howard Marshall, *The point here is not the burdensomeness or oppressiveness of the law, but rather the inability of the Jews to gain salvation through it, and hence its irrelevance as far as salvation is concerned.*
 - 2) He proclaimed that salvation is through the grace of the Lord Jesus for Jews and Gentiles, alike (11), ***But we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will.***
 - a) Peter reminded Jewish believers that they were saved through the grace provided by Jesus.
 - b) He declared that Gentiles were being saved in the same way.
 - c) Peter expressed it in such a way as to reject any thought of Jewish superiority, "we as they."
 - d) He had come a long way from his Judaizing lapse in Syrian Antioch, noted earlier in Galatians 2:11-14.
 - e) Salvation comes through faith in Christ alone.
3. Paul and Barnabas declared how God performed signs and wonders through them among the Gentiles (12), ***And 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.***
- a. All present were silent as Barnabas and Paul gave testimony of God's working in the lives of Gentiles.
 - 1) There was no objection to what Peter had said.
 - 2) Truth was received instead of personal opinion.
 - b. Probably, the order of their names was reversed because of the Jewish believers great respect for Barnabas.
 - c. They declared that God used signs and wonders to confirm the Gentiles' reception of salvation.
 - d. Richard Longenecker, *It was a report not of their successes but of how God had acted, and its implication was that by his acts God had revealed his will.*
4. James sided with Paul and Barnabas (13-18)
- a. James spoke immediately after Paul and Barnabas (13-14), ***After they finished speaking, James replied, "Brothers, listen to me. Simeon has related how God first visited the Gentiles, to take from them a people for his name.***
 - 1) James asked for their attention to what he was to say.
 - a) He was the half-brother of Jesus, the writer of the Epistle of James and the head of the Jerusalem church.
 - b) He took the lead in giving a summary statement concerning the issue of ministry to Gentiles.
 - 2) He reminded them of Peter's ministry to Gentiles.
 - a) Simeon is Peter's Jewish name which he probably used since they were in Jerusalem.
 - b) *first visited*, James reminded listeners that the ministry of Paul and Barnabas was not the first visitation of salvation to Gentiles.
 - c) *a people for His name*
 - 1] James applied a term to Gentile believers that had formerly been used only for Israel.
 - 2] He stressed the fact that salvation of Gentiles was God's initiative and not man's.

- b. He emphasized that the prophets agreed and then quoted from Amos (15-18), *And with this the words of the prophets agree, just as it is written, “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, that 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 known from of old.”*
- 1) James quoted from Amos 9:11-12 to complete the defense of Paul and Barnabas’ ministry to Gentiles.
 - 2) The Council had received testimonies from experience and now validation from Scripture.
 - a) Amos 9:11-12 was not fulfilled in the church but it pictures what was starting to happen in the church.
 - b) *prophets* is plural, implying that the quotation from Amos represented what other prophets affirmed.
 - c) Therefore, Gentile salvation apart from the Law does not contradict Old Testament prophets.
 - 3) There are several interpretations of how Amos is explaining future events but the primary reason James quoted Amos was to confirm that salvation of Gentiles is a work of God with no strings attached.
- c. He recommended that Gentiles adhere to some basic regulations (19-20), *Therefore my judgment is that we should not trouble those of the Gentiles who turn to God, but 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.*
- 1) James proposed some practical recommendations that would not make it difficult for Gentile believers since circumcision and observance of Mosaic Law would not be required.
 - 2) The recommendations
 - a) Don’t eat food dedicated to idols as noted in 1 Corinthians 10:14-22.
 - b) Don’t pursue sexual immorality as noted in Leviticus 18:6-20.
 - c) Don’t eat strangled meat/don’t drink blood as noted in Genesis 9:1-6 and Leviticus 17:11, *For the life of the flesh is in the blood, and I have given it for you on the altar to make atonement for your souls, for it is the blood that makes atonement by the life.*
 - 3) These recommendations were to help Gentiles accept the importance of being set apart to God.
 - a) Any appearance of worshiping idols must be avoided.
 - b) Immorality was an accepted practice in Gentile cultures but it is an abomination to God.
 - c) The importance of blood is tied to the fact that God is the giver of life and that life is in the blood and that spiritual life comes from blood sacrifice.
 - d) How we live impacts what others think of what we believe.
- d. These recommendations were for the benefit of Jews, as well (21), *For from ancient generations Moses has had in every city those who proclaim him, for he is read every Sabbath in the synagogues.*
- 1) These regulations would keep Gentile believers from offending Jewish believers and not put a stumbling block in the path of unsaved Jews.
 - 2) These were not ceremonial restrictions but ethical and moral issues that benefit all believers.
 - 3) A. T. Robertson, *There is the spirit of concession here and love, but not of compromise of principle.*
 - 4) The regulations from James had nothing to do with salvation but everything to do with sanctification.

CONCLUSION

- A. How does a person become a Christian? One must place faith in Christ alone.
- B. Are there different requirements for Jews and Gentiles? No, it is faith in Christ plus nothing.
- C. How should a Christian live? A Christian should be set-apart to God with a lifestyle that does not offend others.