

~ACTS~

Lesson 46- The Conclusion of the Jerusalem Council Meeting

Acts 15:20-35

We have spent the last couple of weeks learning about the importance of the Jerusalem Council meeting in Acts chapter 15 and we have worked our way through the first 19 verses of this meeting. And last week we saw the deep contentions in the hearts of people in the early church as the question of how one is truly saved is brought to light. A surprising revelation that even 18 years after the cross, believing Jews are still resorting to the Law of Moses in accordance with the work of Jesus for their salvation. And the question of whether we are saved by grace through faith or by the works of the Law of Moses is under major dispute. That's the ultimate question of this Apostolic meeting in Jerusalem, and we saw tensions rise as this was discussed. But as Peter, Paul and Barnabas all gave their testimonies of the miracles of God validating this Salvation to the uncircumcised Gentiles, the Judiazers and James could not stand against it. Therefore, as a result of the bold stance of Truth by Peter and Paul, James, as the asserted leader of the Jerusalem church and this council, stands up and makes his determining judgement to the multitudes...

19) Therefore I judge that we should not trouble those from among the Gentiles who are turning to God,

Last week, I showed James' zeal for the Law, and how this eagerness to keep the Law was steering the Jerusalem church off course of the true gospel to the point that it was influencing these Judiazers to pressure uncircumcised Gentiles to follow the Law of Moses unto Salvation. This is what prompted this meeting in the first place, **Acts 15:1-2**. But here, even with his zeal for the Law, James makes the right determination, possibly begrudgingly I might add, to not trouble these believing Gentiles by putting them under the Law of Moses.

So James, not being able to argue with the testimonies of Paul and Peter, determined four commands that the Gentiles should govern their life by.

20) but that we write to them to abstain from things polluted by idols, from sexual immorality, from things strangled, and from blood.

These commands are not meant to be followed for the purpose of Salvation, but for two reasons: 1) as practical ordinances of Fellowship between Jews and Gentiles, and 2) that the Gentiles would conduct a holy manner of life and not be swayed back into their pagan roots. These four commands: **abstain from things polluted by idols, from sexual immorality, from things strangled, and from blood**, they were centered around abstaining from common pagan practices, and these commands have their roots in the Mosaic Law, Deut 12:16, 23. This is why James mentions the Law of Moses in verse 21...

21) For Moses has had throughout many generations those who preach him in every city, being read in the synagogues every Sabbath."

James, being zealous for the Law, is concerned for his fellow Jewish brethren, more so I think than the uncircumcised Gentiles because he mentions the Law being read every Sabbath. So his main focus isn't really about the Jews troubling the Gentiles to follow the Law, but now with this newfound freedom, James doesn't want the Gentiles troubling and offending the conscience of the Jews. So he comes up with this list of four things the Gentiles must abstain from to try and keep peace between the two, Jew and Gentile. This was accepted by Paul because Paul said something similar in his letter to the Corinthians about not hurting a weaker brother's conscience. In 1 Corinthians 8, Paul clearly states that it doesn't matter what kind of foods we eat as Christians. All of it is sanctified by God, but if eating meat sacrificed to idols offends a brother and makes him stumble, then Paul says don't eat that food, **1 Cor 8:4-13**. Paul is basically saying the same thing as James, but I want to point out a subtle difference. Notice that Paul says you can eat anything you want but use discretion and not eat it around a weaker brother lest he stumble. James' decree is still on the Legalistic side saying that no matter what, abstain from the pollution

of idols and from things strangled and from blood. Paul would agree that no matter what, we abstain from sexual immorality, but if you want to have a rare piece of meat that was sacrificed to a demon... as long as it doesn't offend another brother, you can eat it. So Paul doesn't mind enforcing these edicts, but we see him explaining the freedom we have in Christ in his letters, **Galatians 5:13**. With this freedom we have in Christ, we must always be striving to separate ourselves from evil. That's the walk of sanctification. But its so important not to do this on the basis of following the Law or even certain ordinances, but rather by the Spirit from the heart by seeking God first, **Romans 8:13; 6:4-14**. These ordinances are good if they are being led of the Spirit. In general, they were guidelines to help keep peace and not make the other Jewish brothers stumble, and they were also practical ordinances to help the Gentile conduct his life in a holy manner. These four commands would help keep the Gentiles from indulging in old pagan rituals that might tempt them to fall back into their old pagan ways. Many of these Gentiles came from worshipping false idols and sacrificing to demons which included sexual immoral things in the temple and unholy practices with blood and blood sacrifices. So it was a good thing to abstain from these things so as not to be tempted by their pagan roots. But these edicts are useless if they aren't being led of the Spirit. A list of rules does nothing to sanctify us. We are only sanctified through the Word that is made alive in us through His Spirit, John 17:17. It is interesting that in Paul's letter to the Galatians, he doesn't mention these four commands only that they should remember the poor, **Galatians 2:9-10**. It's good to put up safeguards to help us walk in a holy manner, but if these safeguards begin to be a form of Legalism, then it will never work in us sanctification.

So after this determination was made by James, everyone came together in agreement...

22) Then it pleased the apostles and elders, with the whole church, to send chosen men of their own company to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas, namely, Judas who was also named Barsabas, and Silas, leading men among the brethren.

When Paul and Barnabas first arrived, the Apostles and elders had come together in a private meeting, then there was a time of public testimonies from Peter and Paul, and now these Apostles and elders write a letter, and with the consent of the whole church, they send certain men back to Antioch with this decree. So Paul, Barnabas and Titus go back to Antioch and James in conjunction with the Jerusalem church send select men with them as well **namely, Judas who was also named Barsabas, and Silas, leading men among the brethren**. These weren't all the men selected because we will find that Mark also came with them from Jerusalem after abandoning them on the first missionary journey. Judas and Silas are the only ones mentioned here because they are the **leading men among the brethren**. Later we will see that Silas stays in Antioch, and Silas becomes a prominent figure in the New Testament because he will travel with the Apostle Paul on his 2nd missionary journey, and then later in life he will write Peter's first epistle, 1 Peter 5:12.

Luke continues by giving us a written account of this letter that was sent back to Antioch. It is very likely that Luke had a physical copy that he was referring to...

23) They wrote this letter by them: The apostles, the elders, and the brethren, To the brethren who are of the Gentiles in Antioch, Syria, and Cilicia: Greetings.

Notice who this letter is written to... the Gentiles in Antioch, Syria, Cilicia. Two things about this... First, in my opinion, this letter could have been addressed to all the believers, Jews and Gentiles in Antioch, Syria, Cilicia, and even Jerusalem because no one is bound under the Law of Moses any longer. Remember what Peter said in Acts 15:11 - *"But we believe that through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ we shall be saved in the same manner as they."* But as we discussed last week, James ignored this profound statement and because of his zeal for the Law, this letter was only addressed to Gentiles.

Second, notice this letter isn't just going to Antioch. It's going to other churches in Syria and Cilicia. There is a hint of other churches in Syria and Cilicia in [Galatians 1:21](#); and we also see mention of churches in these regions in [Acts 15:41](#). This may be giving us evidence that while Paul was in his home town of Tarsus in Cilicia for three years before Barnabas brought him down to Antioch, Paul was preaching the gospel and establishing Christian churches. And what is interesting about that is this would have been a couple of years before Cornelius.

Verse 24 begins this letter...

24) Since we have heard that some who went out from us have troubled you with words, unsettling your souls, saying, "You must be circumcised and keep the law"—to whom we gave no such commandment—

James begins with the reason for this council. Because **some who went out from us have troubled you with words, unsettling your souls**. It was because of these Judiazers from Jerusalem, from James, that troubled the Gentiles to put on the yoke of bondage on the Gentiles. I think it is interesting that James adds **to whom we gave no such commandment**. James may not have directly told them to go trouble the Gentiles, but it is clear from Galatians 2:12 that these Judiazers were deeply influenced by James' zeal for the Law. I think it is kind of strange how James side steps this issue.

25-26) ²⁵ it seemed good to us, being assembled with one accord, to send chosen men to you with our beloved Barnabas and Paul, ²⁶ men who have risked their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.

There is an obvious respect for Paul and Barnabas among the Jerusalem church. The persecutions that Paul and Barnabas endured for the Gospel on their first journey was horrendous and no doubt they told all about this in their testimonies, Acts 15:4, 12.

27) We have therefore sent Judas and Silas, who will also report the same things by word of mouth.

The church is unified in one accord with this matter of the Gentiles salvation and Judas and Silas, among others, are Jerusalem's representatives of this unity.

28-29) ²⁸ For it seemed good to the Holy Spirit, and to us, to lay upon you no greater burden than these necessary things: ²⁹ that you abstain from things offered to idols, from blood, from things strangled, and from sexual immorality. If you keep yourselves from these, you will do well. Farewell.

These were not necessary things for Salvation, but necessary things to maintain unity and Fellowship between Jew and Gentile and to maintain a holy manner of life among the Gentiles and their pagan roots.

30) So when they were sent off, they came to Antioch; and when they had gathered the multitude together, they delivered the letter.

Remember, this was a 330-mile journey back to Antioch that would have taken about 3-4 weeks to travel. And when they finally arrive in Antioch, they gathered the church together and read the letter to the congregation.

31) When they had read it, they rejoiced over its encouragement.

This letter encouraged them because it silenced the schism in the church. It unified the church under the freedom of the Gospel that Paul had been preaching and rejected the Judiazers that were coming so strongly against Paul and his teachings. Then in addition to the encouragement of the letter, the church was encouraged and strengthened by Judas and Silas...

32) Now Judas and Silas, themselves being prophets, also exhorted and strengthened the brethren with many words.

This word exhorted, παρακαλέω, is the same word (verb form) as encouragement, παράκλησις, in verse 31, but we miss this in our English translation. Luke is making a connection that not only did the letter offer encouragement, but these two prophets also gave encouragement through much Word. I believe the punctuation should be altered in our English translation... **Now Judas and Silas, themselves being prophets, also exhorted and strengthened the brethren.** This is the function of the New Testament prophet; to give encouragement and edification with the Word of God, 1 Cor 14:3.

Also, something to point out, the NKJV says **with many words**, but this word is singular...they **exhorted and strengthened the brethren with much Word**, Logos. This is how we exhort and strengthen, through His mighty Word that speaks life into our soul.

33-34) ³³ **And after they had stayed there for a time, they were sent back with greetings from the brethren to the apostles.** ³⁴ **However, it seemed good to Silas to remain there.**

Judas and Silas weren't the only ones who had come to Antioch from Jerusalem because Luke says "they" plural were sent back, but Silas stayed in Antioch. So there was a company of men who were sent back to Jerusalem. We also know that Mark must have made the journey up to Antioch as well because in verse 37 we see Mark was with them. And last time we saw Mark was when he departed Paul and Barnabas and went back home to Jerusalem, Acts 13:13.

You might notice that there is a note in verse 34 that this verse 34 is missing in the Alexandrian MSS, but clearly it should be there because Silas is still in Antioch in verse 40.

35) Paul and Barnabas also remained in Antioch, teaching and preaching the Word of the Lord, with many others also.

Not only were Judas and Silas encouraging the brethren with the Word, the Logos, Paul and Barnabas also stayed there in their home church of Antioch teaching and preaching the good news of the Word of the Lord, διδάσκοντες καὶ εὐαγγελίζόμενοι, μετὰ καὶ ἑτέρων πολλῶν, τὸν λόγον τοῦ Κυρίου. And they were making disciples in Antioch because there were with many others, ἑτέρων πολλῶν, many others of a different kind... new believers being added by the Lord to the church.

This ends the account of the Jerusalem Council meeting in 50AD and Paul, Barnabas, Silas and Mark all stayed in Antioch for the next year to year and a half exhorting the church until sometime in 51AD when they leave again for the next missionary journey. Because we see verse 36 begin with Paul's 2nd missionary journey "after many days" of staying in Antioch.