

Acts 15B

- This week, we'll rejoin the Council of Jerusalem
 - The council has been convened to address a central question: what is the basis of salvation?
 - The Apostles are not confused concerning the truth of the Gospel
 - They have been preaching it consistently and their letters reflect their understanding of the truth
 - But men within the part of the Pharisees have distorted the Gospel adding works of the Law and of circumcision as a requirement for salvation
 - This teaching has stirred up the emerging Gentile church naturally
 - And they requested the Apostles convene this counsel to answer the question authoritatively
 - Is it necessary to become a Jew before one can become a Christian
 - Last week we read through v.11
 - We will reread a few of those verses this week to remember how Peter responded to the arguments he heard in that meeting

[Acts 15:7](#) After there had been much debate, Peter stood up and said to them, "Brethren, you know that in the early days God made a choice among you, that by my mouth the Gentiles would hear the word of the gospel and believe.

[Acts 15:8](#) "And God, who knows the heart, testified to them giving them the Holy Spirit, just as He also did to us;

[Acts 15:9](#) and He made no distinction between us and them, cleansing their hearts by faith.

[Acts 15:10](#) "Now therefore why do you put God to the test by placing upon the neck of the disciples a yoke which neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear?

[Acts 15:11](#) "But we believe that we are saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, in the same way as they also are."

- Peter had listened to the various arguments, but he already knew how he and the other Apostles would decide the issue

- They had met in secret prior to this meeting, according to Paul in Galatians chapter 2
 - In that meeting they had agreed that salvation was by grace through faith and not by works - both for Jews and Gentiles
- So Peter highlights the error in their thinking
 - To simply review Peter's logic, he says God made clear He was choosing to include Gentiles
 - And God also made clear that they received the same Spirit as the Jewish believer, the clear sign of salvation
 - So if Gentiles were saved by faith alone and received the Spirit, then we know they are not required to become Jew first
- Now this week, we pick up by looking at the crowd's response

[Acts 15:12](#) ¶ All the people kept silent, and they were listening to Barnabas and Paul as they were relating what signs and wonders God had done through them among the Gentiles.

- The first thing we notice is that Peter's words caused the room to fall silent
 - Both sides refrained from further argument or comment
 - It seems that Peter's statements have settled the issue
 - This makes sense for two reasons
 - First, Peter has the credibility of the chief Apostle and the one who God used to bring the Gospel to the Gentiles
 - Who can argue with a man like Peter?
 - If you feel his word isn't authoritative, then why would you even be a part of this movement?
 - Secondly, Peter has the power to bind and loose decisions concerning the doctrine of the church

[Matt. 16:18](#) "I also say to you that you are Peter, and upon this rock I will build My church; and the gates of Hades will not overpower it.

[Matt. 16:19](#) "I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; and whatever you bind on earth shall have been bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall have been loosed in heaven."

- When Peter spoke in this moment, his authority was supernaturally evident and the other men in the room came to recognize him in this way
 - So as Peter spoke, the men fell into line behind him
- The second thing we notice is that this silence gives opportunity for Paul and Barnabas to relate some of their experiences in ministering to Gentiles
 - We are left with the sense that Paul and Barnabas see the chance to fill the silence with stories that will reinforce Peter's viewpoint
 - Peter says they are being saved in the Spirit just as Jews, and Peter and Barnabas have stories to tell that prove that point
 - So they share what they've seen
 - The lessons from Paul and Barnabas is that without God's direct approval and involvement, none of their accomplishments would have been possible
 - Thus proving that Peter's statements are true
- Now another Apostle stands up and speaks

[Acts 15:13](#) After they had stopped speaking, James answered, saying, "Brethren, listen to me.

[Acts 15:14](#) "Simeon has related how God first concerned Himself about taking from among the Gentiles a people for His name.

[Acts 15:15](#) "With this the words of the Prophets agree, just as it is written,

[Acts 15:16](#) 'AFTER THESE THINGS I will return,

AND I WILL REBUILD THE TABERNACLE OF DAVID WHICH HAS FALLEN,

AND I WILL REBUILD ITS RUINS,

AND I WILL RESTORE IT,

[Acts 15:17](#) SO THAT THE REST OF MANKIND MAY SEEK THE LORD,

AND ALL THE GENTILES WHO ARE CALLED BY MY NAME,'

[Acts 15:18](#) SAYS THE LORD, WHO MAKES THESE THINGS KNOWN FROM LONG AGO.

[Acts 15:19](#) "Therefore it is my judgment that we do not trouble those who are turning to God from among the Gentiles,

[Acts 15:20](#) but that we write to them that they abstain from things contaminated by idols and from fornication and from what is strangled and from blood.

[Acts 15:21](#) "For Moses from ancient generations has in every city those who preach him, since he is read in the synagogues every Sabbath."

- Here we see James speaking

- James is the brother of Jesus and the leader of the church in Jerusalem
 - This would also have made him the senior leader at the council
 - Interesting that though Peter was the Apostle chosen to have the keys to the Kingdom and to have the power to bind and loose, nevertheless James was chief elder of the church
 - This may have been because Peter was required to flee the city
- James calls for the group's attention, and then says that Peter's words agree with Scripture
 - Specifically, that God spoke beforehand that He would select from among the Gentiles a people for Himself
 - This is comparable to the way God has reserved for Himself a people from among the Jews
 - The remnant, in other words
 - So the Gentile nations will produce a remnant of sorts for God
 - The Church is mostly a Gentile organism taken from the world as a people for God
- James quotes from Amos 9:11-12
 - Amos declares that God will return after the Tribulation, the Lord will return to rebuild the Temple
 - And it will be beacon to all the nations so that come to it seeking the Lord
 - Amos is describing the way the temple of God acts like a giant lighthouse in the days of the Kingdom calling all nations to worship the Lord
 - James' application here is simply to prove that the OT scriptures have always looked forward to a day when the Gentiles would be included in God's plan
 - James isn't saying that this passage in Amos is speaking of their time specifically
 - He's simply saying that God's affinity for Gentiles is evident in Scripture

- Thus proving that God doesn't intend to make everyone Jewish before they can come to Him
- So James likewise concludes that the Apostles and other leaders "not trouble" the Gentiles who are coming to the Lord
 - The reference to troubling reflects the Pharisees' insisting that the Gentiles be circumcised
 - We can be sure this was a troubling requirement that many men would have resisted
 - But James says this isn't a helpful or necessary requirement
 - Therefore, don't place the burden on the Gentiles
 - But then James addresses the Pharisees' demand that the Gentiles follow the Law
 - James offers a compromise here, but one designed to help the Gentiles integrate successfully into the new church with the Jewish brothers
 - James says write a letter to Gentiles and tell them to abstain from four practices common in Gentile society
 - Three of the items deal with eating and one deals with sexual behavior
 - These areas of daily life were central to maintaining fellowship with Jews
 - It would be difficult enough for Jews to accept the arrival of Gentiles within their congregations
 - But if those Gentiles continue engaging in practices that were abhorrent to Jews, it would make fellowship impossible
 - It would threaten the successful integration of the Gentiles into the body of Christ
 - The eating restrictions were to not eat meat sacrificed to idols, not to eat meat that had been strangled and not to eat blood
 - All three of these things were prohibited under the Jewish law, yet believers (both Jewish and Gentile) were

- free under the liberty they gained in Christ to eat these things
- Still, James knew how offensive these items would be to Jewish believers
 - If Gentiles were to continue in these practices, fellowship with Jews would be impossible
 - Secondly, James says no to fornication, which refers to various sexual practices common to pagan worship
 - Because of their association with sexual immorality, it would have been particularly distasteful to Jews
 - We need to understand that James isn't proposing that these rules are binding rules on Gentiles or suggest that the Law is still in effect for Gentiles or Jewish believers
 - If there was ever a moment in the history of the church when the opportunity existed to declare that the Law was still in effect for the Gentile, this would have been the perfect moment
 - Instead, James says don't trouble the Gentiles with things that the forefathers couldn't live up to either
 - Clearly, James was not interested in reinstating the Law for believers
 - But he did ask them to restrict their liberty in four key areas for the sake of the Jewish brethren
 - This is a prime example of what Paul teaches when he tells us not to allow our liberty to become a means for stumbling our brother
 - It's also important to note that our eldership may from time to time make requests of the body to accept restrictions on liberty for a greater good
 - The Bible teaches we are to respect the judgments of our elders and receive their instruction with humility
 - Sometimes their instructions may be wrong or unhelpful, but for as long as we congregate under their leadership, we must respond to their requests as obedience to the Lord

- If their instructions should contradict Scripture, we reach out to them offering correction in the Biblically correct manner given in Scripture
- Finally, in v.21 James gives his justification for making these requests of the Gentile believers
 - He says that in every city from ancient generations there are people who proclaim and read Moses
 - Moses refers to the books of Moses, the first five books of the Bible
 - More specifically, it refers to the Law found within those books
 - James is reminding the crowd that in every city where the Gospel is being preached, there are Jews hearing the preaching of the Law
 - If the church was to coexist with Jews in these cities - and perhaps even win a few for Christ - it must remain sensitive to the culture of that day
 - And with Moses read and preached routinely, the church must expect that observant Jews will be found living next to Gentile believers in every town
 - If these Gentiles continue in repulsive practices done in the name of Christ, it will work against the purposes of the Gospel
 - James smartly concludes that it would be better to avoid upsetting the Jews by removing these practices from among the Gentiles who will be congregating with Jews in the new church
 - It will also ensure the harmony and unity of the new church
 - And reduce the possibility of persecution by those same Jews
- So following James' instructions, the plan is put into action

[Acts 15:22](#) ¶ Then it seemed good to the apostles and the elders, with the whole church, to choose men from among them to send to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas — Judas called Barsabbas, and Silas, leading men among the brethren, [Acts 15:23](#) and they sent this letter by them,

“ The apostles and the brethren who are elders, to the brethren in Antioch and Syria and Cilicia who are from the Gentiles, greetings.

[Acts 15:24](#) “Since we have heard that some of our number to whom we gave no instruction have disturbed you with their words, unsettling your souls,
[Acts 15:25](#) it seemed good to us, having become of one mind, to select men to send to you with our beloved Barnabas and Paul,
[Acts 15:26](#) men who have risked their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.
[Acts 15:27](#) “Therefore we have sent Judas and Silas, who themselves will also report the same things by word of mouth.
[Acts 15:28](#) “For it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to lay upon you no greater burden than these essentials:
[Acts 15:29](#) that you abstain from things sacrificed to idols and from blood and from things strangled and from fornication; if you keep yourselves free from such things, you will do well. Farewell.”

- We remember that this counsel took place because the first and most prominent Gentile church in Antioch had requested the meeting
 - The Gentiles in Antioch wanted a final decision from the Apostles concerning the truth of the teaching that they be circumcised and follow the Law
 - So James’ pronouncement must be delivered to the church in Antioch
 - And from there it would be distributed to other Gentile churches in the region
 - In this case, Paul and Barnabas were on one side of the argument, and so the counsel didn’t want the church to doubt the truth of their report (since they had a conflict of interest)
 - So they select two men, Judas and Silas, to accompany Paul and Barnabas and testify to the truth of James and and counsel’s judgments
 - We know nothing more about Judas but Silas appears frequently in the book
 - He will accompany Paul on his second missionary journey
 - He was gifted as a prophet and an elder in the Jerusalem church
 - As recognized leaders in the Jerusalem church, these men would be accepted as authorities and their word would be accepted without challenge in Antioch

- Together they carry a letter explaining the decision
 - The first part of the letter renounces the actions and instruction of the men who had visited the church earlier
 - The Pharisees who came preaching circumcision were not men sent with the authority of the Apostles and the Scripture
 - And therefore their teaching should be rejected
 - In their place, the James repeats the instructions agreed upon in Jerusalem
 - Notice in v.28 James credits the Holy Spirit with being the One Who delivered these instructions to the church leaders
 - This is in keeping with Jesus' promise that the Holy Spirit would guide the church into all truth, according to John 16:13
 - Finally, notice the end of the letter
 - James says that observing these four restrictions will result in the Gentile church "doing well"
 - He didn't say it would result in righteousness or holiness
 - Or even that it meant they would avoid sin, since these restrictions are not in all cases sin
 - Rather, he says the church will do well, which means the church will prosper and remain united and strong
 - It reflects the fact these instructions were given to unify the body, not for the purpose of ensuring personal holiness or righteousness
- It falls to Paul and Barnabas to deliver the message in the letter to the congregation

[Acts 15:30](#) ¶ So when they were sent away, they went down to Antioch; and having gathered the congregation together, they delivered the letter.

[Acts 15:31](#) When they had read it, they rejoiced because of its encouragement.

[Acts 15:32](#) Judas and Silas, also being prophets themselves, encouraged and strengthened the brethren with a lengthy message.

[Acts 15:33](#) After they had spent time there, they were sent away from the brethren in peace to those who had sent them out.

[Acts 15:34](#) [But it seemed good to Silas to remain there.]

[Acts 15:35](#) But Paul and Barnabas stayed in Antioch, teaching and preaching with many others also, the word of the Lord.

- The occasion for delivering the decision of the counsel is a large congregational meeting
 - We can imagine the tension and anticipation in the room, particularly among the males
 - Would Paul announce that circumcision was a requirement for salvation?
 - Would the Gentiles be required to follow the Law?
 - And in the meantime, were they not saved until these things took place?
 - What a terrible fear to carry, especially after having already trusted that they were saved by faith
- So Paul and Barnabas read the letter, and the crowd rejoices
 - That must have been an understatement
 - Here was an edict of freedom delivered from the head of the Jewish center of evangelism to the head of the Gentile center of evangelism
 - The room was encouraged, and it gave occasion for the two visitors from Jerusalem to give the church a long message
 - Interesting that a long message was an encouragement to the church
 - Remember that the next time your pastor runs long on Sunday
 - These men have the gift of prophecy, so their message probably included both teaching and reports from the church in Jerusalem
 - You can probably compare the experience to a visiting missionary speaking on Sunday
 - After they spoke, the two men hung around the church for a time, and then the church sent them back to Jerusalem
 - In v.34, you may find a statement declaring that Silas remained

- There is good evidence to suggest this was not in the original text written by Luke
 - Instead, some well-meaning scribe added it thinking it would clear up a confusion in Luke's text
 - Notice in v.40 Paul takes Silas from Antioch on his second missionary journey
 - The scribe assumed that Silas couldn't have returned to Jerusalem as described in v.33 since Paul takes Silas with him
 - This addition was well-intentioned but unnecessary
 - It is reasonable that Silas would return to Jerusalem after this trip to report to the elders in Jerusalem
 - But then later he returned to Antioch before Paul departed on his journey
 - The scribe made an addition that wasn't correct or necessary
 - Before Paul leaves for his second missionary journey, the events of Galatians 2 occurred in the city during this time
 - Peter came up to Antioch and while he was there, elders from Jerusalem visited...perhaps Silas was among them
 - And at their arrival, Peter withdraws from eating with Gentiles
 - It was probably the case that a faction in the Jewish church continued to press for a separation of Jew and Gentile
 - Refusing to accept the decision of the counsel of Jerusalem
 - And though Peter disagreed with them and knew that they were contradicting the Gospel, still he sought their approval at least at times
 - So when these men arrived in Antioch, Peter changed his attitude and stopped eating with the Gentile brothers
 - So Paul says in Galatians 2 he confronted Peter to his face over the hypocrisy

- Speaking of the missionary journey...

[Acts 15:36](#) ¶ After some days Paul said to Barnabas, "Let us return and visit the brethren in every city in which we proclaimed the word of the Lord, and see how they are."

[Acts 15:37](#) Barnabas wanted to take John, called Mark, along with them also.

[Acts 15:38](#) But Paul kept insisting that they should not take him along who had deserted them in Pamphylia and had not gone with them to the work.

[Acts 15:39](#) And there occurred such a sharp disagreement that they separated from one another, and Barnabas took Mark with him and sailed away to Cyprus.

[Acts 15:40](#) But Paul chose Silas and left, being committed by the brethren to the grace of the Lord.

[Acts 15:41](#) And he was traveling through Syria and Cilicia, strengthening the churches.

- Paul gets the bug to move out again and see what has become of the churches he planted
 - He encourages Barnabas to accompany him again
 - Barnabas agrees but he makes a suggestion that upsets Paul
 - Barnabas wants to take John Mark with them
 - John Mark had abandoned the first missionary journey in Pamphylia, and Paul thought this was reason enough to prevent John Mark from joining the second journey
 - Barnabas stuck by his guns, and this led to a sharp disagreement and separation
 - The words for separation in Greek has a root from which we get the word schism
 - There was a divide between these men over this issue
 - So Paul chooses a new partner in Silas and Barnabas takes John Mark
 - We never hear about Barnabas and John Mark again in the book of Acts
 - They head to Barnabas' home town in Cyprus
 - Though Paul says in 1Cor that they reconciled to a degree and Colossians 4 says they maintained fellowship

- Paul also describes reconciliation with John Mark in 2Tim 4 and Phil 24
- We can make several observations and conclusions from this scene
 - First, those on the frontlines of ministry need partners they can work with and trust
 - We shouldn't work on our own
 - Paul and Barnabas thought it so important who accompanied them that it led to a permanent separation
 - Secondly, fellowship can still be maintained at a distance
 - The fact that they separated didn't require hard feelings
 - Third, the effect of this separation appears to have been similar to the effect of persecution in the church in Jerusalem
 - It resulted in two missionary teams going out instead of only one big one
 - In ministry, our goal shouldn't be to grow but to replicate, and there is a difference
 - Growth by itself becomes just weight and baggage and stagnation
 - Replication produces copycats who want to do the same thing
 - And copycats don't like competition, so they move to new places
 - We want copycats
- This separation also gives opportunity for a new missionary, Silas
 - He is similar to Paul in numerous ways
 - A leader in the Jerusalem church and prophet like Paul
 - He's also a Roman citizen
 - And he is sent out by the church in Antioch with Paul