

## *Acts of the Apostles – Chapter 15*

### *The Council at Jerusalem*

*15:1 Certain people came down from Judea to Antioch and were teaching the believers: “Unless you are circumcised, according to the custom taught by Moses, you cannot be saved.” 2 This brought Paul and Barnabas into sharp dispute and debate with them. So Paul and Barnabas were appointed, along with some other believers, to go up to Jerusalem to see the apostles and elders about this question.3 The church sent them on their way, and as they traveled through Phoenicia and Samaria, they told how the Gentiles had been converted. This news made all the believers very glad.*

At the end of Chapter 14, Paul and Barnabas had returned to the city of Antioch of Syria. In these verses, we find men coming from Judea to teach the believers in this city. From these verses, we can conclude that these men were Jewish Christians that were sent by themselves. These “certain” men taught that you must convert to Judaism (become a Jew) to be saved. Men must be circumcised. This would put Christians under the Law.

While Paul and Barnabas were in Pisidian Antioch Paul taught in Acts 13:39, “39 And by Him [Jesus] everyone who believes is justified from all things from which you could not be justified by the law of Moses.” Paul taught that salvation came from Jesus alone and not the Law. Even Jesus in Matthew 5:17-18 that Jesus did not come to abolish the Law and the Prophets but came to fulfill them. He fulfilled prophecy and the Law. We are now under the Law of Christ. Our righteousness comes from Christ through faith. Paul teaches in Ephesians 2:8-9 that salvation is a gift given through faith and not of works.

So the leaders from Antioch sent Paul and Barnabas to Jerusalem to talk to the Apostles and elders. As they passed through Phoenicia and Samaria, they told believers that Gentiles had become believers in Jesus as the Christ. This fact made the people of Samaria happy because the Samaritans were not accepted into Judaism. They had a way to get to God without becoming Jews.

*15:4 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.*

*5 Then some of the believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees stood up and said, “The Gentiles must be circumcised and required to keep the law of Moses.”*

When Paul and Barnabas arrived in Jerusalem they were greeted by the Apostles and elders. In verse 5, we find the Pharisees who are now believers were putting the Law first, again. They were saying that believers must be circumcised and held to the Law. We should not confuse the Law with the Ten Commandments. The Law included guidelines for living, as well as circumcision, food laws and sacrifices.

*15:6 The apostles and elders met to consider this question. 7 After much discussion, Peter got up and addressed them: “Brothers, you know that some time ago God made a choice among you that the Gentiles might hear from my lips the message of the gospel and believe.8 God, who knows the heart, showed that he accepted them by giving the Holy Spirit to them, just as he did*

*to us. 9 He did not discriminate between us and them, for he purified their hearts by faith. 10 Now then, why do you try to test God by putting on the necks of Gentiles a yoke that neither we nor our ancestors have been able to bear? 11 No! We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved, just as they are."*

*12 The whole assembly became silent as they listened to Barnabas and Paul telling about the signs and wonders God had done among the Gentiles through them.*

Fortunately, Peter was part of the group. Peter had had a vision in Joppa about a Roman centurion in Caesarea. He understood that God had not made anything unclean and that it was acceptable for Gentiles to gain salvation through Jesus. God made no distinction between Jew and Gentile. Both were given the Holy Spirit without converting to Judaism. Peter points out that they were saved by faith in Jesus. Everyone listened silently showing that these men had honorable hearts not like the Jewish leaders or the Jews that they had encountered on their journey. Paul and Barnabas were able to report on the signs and wonders that God had done through them among the Gentiles.

*15:13 When they finished, James spoke up. "Brothers," he said, "listen to me. 14 Simon has described to us how God first intervened to choose a people for his name from the Gentiles. 15 The words of the prophets are in agreement with this, as it is written:*

*16 "After this I will return  
and rebuild David's fallen tent.*

*Its ruins I will rebuild,  
and I will restore it,*

*17 that the rest of mankind may seek the Lord,  
even all the Gentiles who bear my name,  
says the Lord, who does these things'—*

*18 things known from long ago.*

This man named James was the brother of Jesus and the author of the Book of James. His examples were taken from the Book of the Law and Prophets because these were mostly Christian Jews that he was speaking to. It is interesting that James uses the previous form of Peter's name Simeon or Simon. From Peter's experience, he says that God has shown that Gentiles are acceptable to bring directly to Himself without first becoming Jews. He quotes Amos 9:11-12 to tell them that God's word concerning the Gentiles is fulfilled in Paul's missionary trip.

*15:19 "It is my judgment, therefore, that we should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God. 20 Instead we should write to them, telling them to abstain from food polluted by idols, from sexual immorality, from the meat of strangled animals and from blood. 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."*

James reduces the requirements for becoming a Christian. He lists four laws that the Gentiles should abstain from: Food polluted by idols; Sexual immorality; the meat of strangled animals; blood. Abstaining from sexual immorality is understandable but abstaining from food polluted by idols goes back to Leviticus 17:8-9. It is food sacrificed to idols. Eating this food would have pointed to the god or gods that it was sacrificed to. It did not point to the true source, the one true God of Israel. For the issue with blood see Leviticus 17:10-12 and Genesis 9:4. These verses give this warning "Do not eat any meat with the blood still in it." The blood was where the living part of

the animal was believed to be. If an animal is strangled it is more difficult to remove all of the lifeblood. They wanted the lifeblood drained for the same reason as above. James chose these laws because they were listed in the book of Moses and this book had been taught in the synagogues so surely all Jews or anyone being taught there would know these laws.

### *The Council's Letter to Gentile Believers*

*15:22 Then the apostles and elders, with the whole church, decided to choose some of their own men and send them to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas. They chose Judas (called Barsabbas) and Silas, men who were leaders among the believers. 23 With them they sent the following letter:*

A letter was adopted to take to the Gentiles so everyone would have the same understanding of what was required of them. We know that salvation comes from faith in Jesus alone. It does not require the addition of four additional laws. Barnabas and Paul, as well as two chosen delegates Judas called Barsabbas and Silas were sent to take the letter to Antioch in Syria.

*The apostles and elders, your brothers,*

*To the Gentile believers in Antioch, Syria and Cilicia:*

*Greetings.*

*24 We have heard that some went out from us without our authorization and disturbed you, troubling your minds by what they said. 25 So we all agreed to choose some men and send them to you with our dear friends Barnabas and Paul— 26 men who have risked their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. 27 Therefore we are sending Judas and Silas to confirm by word of mouth what we are writing. 28 It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us not to burden you with anything beyond the following requirements: 29 You are to abstain from food sacrificed to idols, from blood, from the meat of strangled animals and from sexual immorality. You will do well to avoid these things.*

*Farewell.*

The letter was very simple. It contained a salutation, introduction of Judas and Silas, a list of the four laws that all believers should follow and a closing.

*15:30 So the men were sent off and went down to Antioch, where they gathered the church together and delivered the letter. 31 The people read it and were glad for its encouraging message. 32 Judas and Silas, who themselves were prophets, said much to encourage and strengthen the believers. 33 After spending some time there, they were sent off by the believers with the blessing of peace to return to those who had sent them. [34But it seemed good to Silas to remain there. (early versions did not contain v 34)]35 But Paul and Barnabas remained in Antioch, where they and many others taught and preached the word of the Lord.*

We are told that they went to Antioch and delivered the letter. I picture Judas and Silas spending extra time explaining the laws contained in the letter. Judas and Silas went back to Jerusalem and Barnabas and Paul stayed in Antioch teaching.

### ***Disagreement Between Paul and Barnabas***

***36 Some time later Paul said to Barnabas, "Let us go back and visit the believers in all the towns where we preached the word of the Lord and see how they are doing." 37 Barnabas wanted to take John, also called Mark, with them, 38 but Paul did not think it wise to take him, because he had deserted them in Pamphylia and had not continued with them in the work. 39 They had such a sharp disagreement that they parted company. Barnabas took Mark and sailed for Cyprus, 40 but Paul chose Silas and left, commended by the believers to the grace of the Lord. 41 He went through Syria and Cilicia, strengthening the churches.***

"Paul had the heart of both an obstetrician (bringing people into the body of Christ) and a pediatrician (growing people up in the body of Christ)." (Guzik)

We see a disagreement about whether or not to take John-Mark on this second mission trip. In Acts 13, we learned that they had taken him with them to help as far as Cyprus. Acts 13:13 told us that he went back to Jerusalem. Although it doesn't say much in Acts 13 about why he left them, it must have been under less than honorable circumstances because Paul refused to take him along on this trip. So much so, that Paul and Barnabas parted ways. Barnabas and Mark went to Cyprus but Paul chose Silas and went through Syria and Cilicia.

"Strengthening the churches: This was Paul's work, in addition to evangelism. New Christians needed strong churches to grow and mature in." (Guzik)