

Saved by Grace

Week Commencing 08 May 2023

Notes for next week's sermon on Acts 15 – Grappling with freedom grace brings # 2

Since Peter met Cornelius back in ch 10, Gentiles had been becoming Christians, receiving the Holy Spirit and being baptised. This was a massive change with which the Jewish converts had to wrestle. Yet once the Jerusalem church leaders were briefed, they could only rejoice in the fact that God had also granted the gift of repentance to Gentiles. When the leaders went on to hear news of similar happenings at Antioch, they sent Barnabas to investigate, and he reported seeing evidence of the grace of God and rejoiced (11:23). In last week's chapter, we saw more Gentiles being converted and Paul report that as the news was being rejected by Jews, he was going to take it the Gentiles. The Jewish leaders have no problem with the concept of Gentiles becoming believers – many Old Testament passages predicted their inclusion. But how were they to be incorporated into the believing community? By circumcision and observing the law? And yet Gentile converts were being welcomed into the fellowship by baptism, *without* circumcision. They were becoming **Christians** without becoming **Jews**! Could the leaders in Jerusalem give their approval to conversion without circumcision and to faith in Jesus without the works of the law? Those are the important questions which form the background to this very significant chapter of Acts.

DAY 1: Read Acts 15:1-5

Some men came down from Judea to Antioch. There's a foreboding sound to this statement! They were Pharisees (v5), and it appears they had formed a pressure group sometimes referred to as "Judaizers" or "the circumcision party". They were not opposed to the Gentile mission but were determined that it must come under the umbrella of the Jewish church and that Gentile believers must submit and commit to circumcision and law observance. It is not surprising therefore that this brought them into sharp dispute (v2) with Paul and Barnabas.

We need to be very clear what the issue was: they were insisting that without circumcision, Gentile converts could not be saved. Now of course circumcision had been an important sign under the old covenant, but now they are making it a condition of salvation for those who had *never* been under the old covenant! They were telling Gentile converts that faith in Jesus was not sufficient for salvation: they must add to faith, circumcision and to circumcision, observance of the law. The issue was immense. The way of salvation was at stake. The gospel was in dispute and the very foundations of the Christian faith were being undermined. (Galatians 2:11-20 is thought to give further information which led to the dispute Paul had on this issue.)

The issue can be clarified by a series of questions: is the sinner saved by the sheer grace of God in and through Christ crucified, when he or she simply believes? Has Jesus Christ by his death and resurrection done everything necessary for salvation? Or are we saved partly through the grace of Christ and partly through our own good works and religious performance?

So, a delegation was sent to Jerusalem in order to thrash out these important questions. Paul and Barnabas and some others were appointed and sent off. They ministered along the way and while they were warmly welcomed to Jerusalem, the issue at hand was soon restated and served to focus everyone's attention (v5).

Have you considered the basis of your salvation? Do you consider it to be through "Christ alone?", embraced through "faith alone"? There are important implications of this debate for us all!

DAY 2: Read Acts 15:6-11

The apostles and elders met to consider this question. Naturally, we only read here a pithy summary of the discussion that took place. First Peter spoke (vv7-11), then Paul supported by Barnabas (v12) and finally James (vv13-21).

Peter reminded the assembly about Cornelius which may by this time have taken place 10 years earlier. He made it clear that this had been entirely God's doing. God made a choice that Gentiles should hear the gospel and believe. And God had demonstrated his complete acceptance of the Gentiles by giving them the Holy Spirit. He showed no distinction between Gentiles and Jews, for (v9) he purified the hearts of the Gentiles by faith. If that had been so clearly the work of God, who were they to now lay heavy burdens on the Gentiles – especially when the Jews themselves had not been able to keep the demands of the law! So, Peter concludes strongly: *We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved, just as they are.*

The central theme of Peter's testimony was not just that Gentiles had heard the gospel, believed in Jesus, received the Spirit and been purified by faith, but that at each stage God *made no distinction between us and them*. If only the Judaizers could grasp that God makes no distinctions between Jews and Gentiles, but saves both by grace through faith, *they* would not make distinctions either. Saved by grace, which is received by faith: it is the consistent testimony of the New Testament, and it is humbling and thrilling!

DAY 3: Read Acts 15:12-21

Paul and Barnabas' testimony is reported quite briefly in v12, probably because readers of Acts have just heard about all that God had been doing in Acts 12-14. Their report would have confirmed God's work among Gentiles as being real and genuine.

James – one of Jesus' brothers and author of the Epistle by that name – now speaks up. He is a key leader in the Jerusalem church and appears to be the moderator of the debate. He reminds everyone that Israel as a nation was chosen from among all people in the first place (right back in Genesis 12) and that (with a quote from Amos 9:11-12) it was God's design that when he re-established David's kingdom (through Jesus), Gentiles would seek the Lord! That is, Gentiles were in God's mind and purposes all along, to be included in the redeemed people of God!

And with that, James hands down a judgement – a conviction – a firm proposal – which was endorsed by the gathering. On the one hand, they ought *not to make it difficult for Gentiles who are turning to God*. They must not burden them by asking them to add to their faith in Christ, circumcision or observing the entire law. At the same time, it was necessary to appeal to the Gentile believers, to respect the consciences of their Jewish fellow believers by abstaining from a few practices which might offend them. As the law of Moses was still read in the synagogues, Jewish sensitivities ought not to be ignored.

But why were these four requirements singled out? All four seem to relate to ceremonial laws laid down in Leviticus 17-18. Three of them concerned dietary matters which could inhibit Jewish-Gentile common meals. And 'sexual immorality' (Greek word *porneia*) refers to every kind of unlawful sexual intercourse, perhaps referring to all the irregular 'marriages' of Leviticus 18. For Gentiles to be sensitive to these matters, was a matter of love and courtesy. (See also Romans 14:1-8 and consider if there is anything you do currently, which may be a stumbling block to a Christian brother or sister.)

DAY 4: Read Acts 15:22-41

The council agreed with James' summary. His proposal of Gentile Christian abstinence in these four cultural areas seemed a wise policy to promote mutual tolerance and fellowship. As a letter can seem impersonal, they also sent Paul and Barnabas and others who could explain its origin, interpret its meaning and secure its acceptance.

Luke reports the reception of the letter by the largely Gentile churches, first in Antioch (vv30-35) and second in Syria and Cilicia (vv36-40) and third in Galatia (16:1-5). As it was in Antioch that the controversy had arisen, it was appropriate that the response was shared there first. Imagine their joy on hearing the news that Gentiles who had believed in Jesus were to be accepted as Christians without the need to also become Jews!

The parting of company of Paul and Barnabas was sad, but used by God to multiply the work as each pair strengthened the churches they visited.

Today, we as Gentiles, can rejoice in our salvation which as we've been celebrating, is entirely of God's grace. And we thank the Lord for this council of Jerusalem which brought clarity to this dispute for both those there at the time, and indeed for us!

Resources: The Message of Acts by John Stott