

The Book of Acts  
Chapter 15

*Acts 15:8-10*

*8 And God, which knoweth the hearts, bare them witness, giving them the Holy Ghost, even as he did unto us;*

*9 And put no difference between us and them, purifying their hearts by faith.*

*10 Now therefore why tempt ye God, to put a yoke upon the neck of the disciples, which neither our fathers nor we were able to bear?*

I. Review

1. Chapter 14 was the second half of Paul and Barnabas' first missionary journey, that began in the city of Iconium, where they preached and saw signs and wonders and multitudes of Jews and Gentiles believe.
2. Opposition to their preaching arose again and when they learned of a plot to kill them, they fled to the next city of Lystra, where they preached the Word, and raised a crippled man, and a priest of the pagan temple of Jupiter tried to offer a sacrifice to worship Paul and Barnabas.
3. By this time, some Jews from Antioch and Iconium arrived and stirred up the multitude and they stoned Paul, leaving him for dead.
4. But Paul stood up healed and went on to preach in one more city, the city of Derbe, before starting their return journey back home.
5. Their 2-year trip had covered around 935 miles by land and sea, and there were now multitudes of believers and churches in at least 7 new cities.

II. The Council at Jerusalem

A. What is a Jewish Christian?

1. The early church was made up of mostly Jews who initially did not see themselves as something other than Jews who were following the Jewish Messiah.
2. Their lives and worship had been centered on the law of Moses, God's covenant with Israel, sacrifices, circumcision, rituals, festivals, and sabbaths.
3. Even after the death and resurrection of Jesus, and the Holy Ghost outpouring on the Day of Pentecost when the new covenant became effective, they continued to observe many Jewish practices.
4. But some of these practices were associated with traditions and ordinances that had been fulfilled by being nailed to Jesus' cross:  
*Col 2:14 Blotting out the handwriting of ordinances that was against us, which was contrary to us, and took it out of the way, nailing it to his cross;*
5. Circumcision was among those things. It had served only as a symbol of the old covenant, but was now replaced by the symbol the new covenant, water baptism into Jesus:

*Col 2:11-12*

*11 In him you were also circumcised, in the putting off of the sinful nature, not with a circumcision done by the hands of men but with the circumcision done by Christ, 12*

*having been buried with him in baptism and raised with him through your faith in the power of God, who raised him from the dead. NIV*

6. Their Jewish roots had emphasized a strict obedience to those traditions and ordinances in what had become a works-based religion. That opened a path for a group to rise in the church, known as Judaizers.
- B. The false doctrine of the Judaizers (Verses 1-2)
  1. **Definition:** Judaizers - Christian Jews who held to the observance of the ceremonial Law of Moses, and required the same of new believers.
  2. Later in the chapter, James, the Lord's brother, identified the doctrine of the Judaizers: *Acts 15:24 Forasmuch as we have heard, that certain which went out from us have troubled you with words, subverting your souls, saying, Ye must be circumcised, and keep the law: to whom we gave no such commandment:*
  3. While Paul and Barnabas had been away on the missionary trip, some of those false teachers had snuck into their home church in Antioch with their message.  
*Acts 15:1-2*  
*1 And certain men which came down from Judaea taught the brethren, and said, **Except ye be circumcised after the manner of Moses, ye cannot be saved.***  
*2 When therefore Paul and Barnabas had **no small dissension and disputation** with them, they determined that Paul and Barnabas, and certain other of them, should go up to Jerusalem unto the apostles and elders about this question.*
  4. These Jews had a similar background to Paul, as they were former Pharisees, which we will read in verse 5. And just like Paul had been, they were very zealous for the ceremonial Law of Moses.
  5. This caused "**no small dissension and disputation,**" which means a major argument in the church. As far as Paul and Barnabas were concerned, these had sown seeds of false doctrine and discord in the church in Antioch.
- C. Taking the dispute to the Jerusalem Council (Verses 3-6)
  1. Paul and Barnabas and some others in the church of Antioch, decided to go to Jerusalem and have the matter settled by the Apostles and elders of the church there.
  2. That is an important action of the church to take note of. The local congregation chose to settle the doctrinal dispute by submitting to a discussion before the elders, rather than allowing their own stubbornness or pride to permit the church to divide over this issue.
  3. But there was a risk in pursuing this solution. It meant that someone was going to be judged right and someone was going to be judged wrong. But getting this issue right and saving unity in the church was worth it.
  4. Even in this crisis, they took time to celebrate the victories of the mission's trip.
  5. They had just returned from a 2-year missionary journey of nearly 1,000 miles, so they took time to stop and share the great reports along their 300-mile journey from Antioch to Jerusalem.  
*Acts 15:3 And being brought on their way by the church, they passed through Phenice and Samaria, declaring the conversion of the Gentiles: and they caused great joy unto all the brethren.*

6. **[map: Antioch, Phoenicia, Samaria]**
  7. And when they arrived in Jerusalem, they were warmly received:  
*Acts 15:4 And when they were come to Jerusalem, they were received of the church, and of the apostles and elders, and they declared all things that God had done with them.*
  8. After the good reports, it was time to address the problem at hand:  
*Acts 15:5-6*  
*5 But there rose up certain of the sect of the Pharisees which believed, saying, That it was needful to circumcise them, and to command them to keep the law of Moses.*  
*6 And the apostles and elders came together for to consider of this matter.*
  9. First, I think it is a wonderful thing that some Pharisees had been saved. If you remember, groups of Pharisees had strongly opposed Jesus during His ministry.
  10. It was some Pharisees who had accused Jesus of breaking the Sabbath, violating their purification customs, hanging out with sinners, accused Him of blasphemy, and ultimately sentenced Him to die.
  11. To them, Jesus wasn't strict enough with their traditions and standards and they thought of Him as a compromiser on what really mattered.
  12. And now, it is former Pharisees who are accusing the apostles of not being strict enough with their standards and traditions. It was a matter of old school traditions versus new covenant theology.
- D. Peter addresses the council (Verses 7-11)
1. It appears that the Judaizers spoke first, but their arguments were not recorded.  
*Acts 15:7 **And when there had been much disputing** [lengthy debate], Peter rose up, and said unto them, Men and brethren, ye know how that a good while ago God made choice among us, that the Gentiles by my mouth should hear the word of the gospel, and believe.*
  2. As we see, Peter was the first to answer the Judaizers. That was appropriate because God "made choice among us" of selecting Peter to preach to the Gentiles.
  3. Peter addressed the issue at hand:  
*Acts 15:10 Now therefore why tempt ye God, to put a yoke upon the neck of the disciples, which **neither our fathers nor we were able to bear?***
  4. The Judaizers wanted to "put a yoke" on the believers of keeping all aspects of the law, including circumcision, but Peter identified how the Gentiles were saved in the first place, without circumcision:  
*Acts 15:8-9, 11*  
*8 And God, which knoweth the hearts, bare them witness, **giving them the Holy Ghost, even as he did unto us;***  
*9 And put no difference between us and them, **purifying their hearts by faith.***  
*11 But we believe that **through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ we shall be saved, even as they.***
  5. In the beginning, they had been saved by grace and by receiving the Holy Ghost, not through the ceremonial works of the Law. And it had been the same when the Gentiles were first saved.
  6. Even the people of Israel had never fully kept all the law and their traditions. Jesus had observed that truth:

*Matt 23:3-4*

*3 All therefore whatsoever they bid you observe, that observe and do; but do not ye after their works: for **they say, and do not.***

*4 For they bind **heavy burdens and grievous to be borne, and lay them on men's shoulders; but they themselves will not move them with one of their fingers.***

7. In another place, Jesus made the serious charge that they had made their traditions even more important than the law of God. (Matt 15:1-6).
  
- E. Paul and Barnabas address the council (Verse 12)
  1. After Peter addressed the church council, Paul and Barnabas testified next.  
*Acts 15:12 Then all the multitude kept silence, and gave audience to Barnabas and Paul, declaring what miracles and wonders God had wrought among the Gentiles by them.*
  2. They held the people spellbound in silence, as they related the many wonderful conversions among the Gentiles, and the miracles and wonders by which God had confirmed His Word.
  3. No doubt they recalled testimonies of how the governor of Cyprus was saved after God had struck the false prophet Bar-jesus with blindness; there was the revival in Antioch of Pisidia where Jews and Gentiles were saved; there was the healing of the crippled man in Lystra, how the people tried to worship them and sacrifice to them, and then stoned Paul leaving him for dead; his rising up to life again; and then many other Gentiles came to follow Jesus among those cities.
  4. These testimonies convinced the Apostles and elders that this was totally a work of God's grace, not because they had followed the laws and ordinances.
  
- F. Who is James? (verse 13-18)
  1. After Paul and Barnabas concluded their testimony, James, likely the next oldest brother of Jesus born to Mary (Mark 6:3, Gal 1:19), spoke up as the final authority on the matter.
  2. At some point early in the church, James had become the recognized leader of the Jerusalem church.
  3. James was likely present in the upper room on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 1:14) and was among the first receiving the Holy Ghost. James spoke:  
*Acts 15:13 And after they had held their peace, James answered, saying, Men and brethren, hearken unto me:*
  4. James recounted recent history and then referred to a prophecy Amos in which the Lord said that the Gentiles would seek after the Lord and be called by His name (Amos 9:11-12). Then James gave a final decision on the dispute.
  
- G. The Decision of James (Verses 19-35)
  1. The question was, should we require the Gentiles to obey all the laws, or just some of them?  
*Acts 15:19-20*  
*19 Wherefore my sentence is, that we trouble not them, which from among the Gentiles are turned to God:*  
*20 But that we write unto them, that they abstain from pollutions of idols, and from fornication, and from things strangled, and from blood.*

2. James' decision was that Gentiles should not be required to observe circumcision, but only to abstain from the sinful associations of their former lives. They had been idol worshippers, a very common practice of that day and region.
3. And such idol worship had included animal sacrifices, eating blood, and visits with pagan temple prostitutes.
4. James' ruling reflected, in general, what their repentance would have accomplished when they came to God—turning away from their old sinful practices.
5. These simple restrictions were very liberating to the church and opened the door for peaceful fellowship between Jews and Gentiles.
6. Next, they put that decision in writing and sent it to the church in Antioch by Paul and Barnabas, accompanied by Judas and Silas as witnesses to confirm the decision of the Apostles.

*Acts 15:22-23*

*22 Then pleased it the apostles and elders, with the whole church, to send chosen men of their own company to Antioch with **Paul and Barnabas**; namely, **Judas** surnamed **Barsabas**, and **Silas**, chief men among the brethren:*

*23 And they wrote letters by them after this manner; The apostles and elders and brethren send greeting unto the brethren which are of the Gentiles in Antioch and Syria and Cilicia:*

7. **[map: Antioch, Syria, Cilicia]** – Acts does not record churches being started in these areas, but it is quite possible the church in Antioch had started daughter works in these areas.
8. It is important to point out that those former Pharisees who had been the source of this conflict, had basically accused Paul and Barnabas of being too soft in their preaching.
9. But after James sided with Paul and Barnabas on the issue, notice how James started the written decree that was sent out to the churches:

*Acts 15:25-26*

*25 It seemed good unto us, being assembled with **one accord**, to send chosen men unto you with our beloved **Barnabas and Paul** [in v. 22, Luke referred to them as Paul and Barnabas, but James says Barnabas and Paul]*

*26 Men that have **hazarded their lives** for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.*

10. James gives the highest regard for the stellar reputation of these brothers, which served to quiet the voices raised against them.
11. When the decree was read in the church in Antioch, it brought joy and consolation:

*Acts 15:30-31*

*30 So when they were dismissed, they came to Antioch: and when they had gathered the multitude together [the church had grown], they delivered the epistle:*

*31 Which when they had read, they rejoiced for the consolation [encouragement]*

12. We will read in the next chapter how Paul shared this decree on his next missionary journey among the Gentile churches, and it was well received by them as well. (Acts 16:4-5).
13. I want to quickly look at the two men who accompanied Paul and Barnabas from Jerusalem, Judas and Silas.

*Acts 15:32 And Judas and Silas, being prophets also themselves, exhorted the brethren with many words, and confirmed them.*

14. Nothing more is recorded of Judas, because he returned to Jerusalem shortly after this. But Silas remained in Antioch, and that was most fortunate for Paul.

### III. Beginning the Second Missionary Journey (Verses 36-41)

1. After continuing the ministry in Antioch for some time, Paul began to think about the churches he and Barnabas had started on their first missionary journey. He felt the need to return to these cities to check on their progress:

*Acts 15:36 And some days after Paul said unto Barnabas, Let us go again and visit our brethren in every city where we have preached the word of the Lord, and see how they do.*

2. Barnabas thought that was a good idea. He also thought it was a good idea to take his nephew, John Mark, along with them. But Paul didn't agree.
3. John Mark had left them in the middle of their first trip and wasn't willing to take a chance with him on this second journey.
4. This caused a sharp contention between them, that ultimately ended their association for a time:

*Acts 15:39-40*

*39 And the contention was so sharp between them, that they departed asunder one from the other: and so Barnabas took Mark, and sailed unto Cyprus;*

*40 And Paul chose Silas, and departed, being recommended by the brethren unto the grace of God.*

5. If Paul had remembered how Barnabas had taken him under his wing in the beginning when the rest of the church didn't trust him, he might have showed more compassion on Mark.
6. It was certainly in keeping with Barnabas' character, whom the apostles had nicknamed, "the son of consolation," or encouragement, that he wanted to take another promising yet unproven young man under his wing to mentor and encourage.
7. But on the other hand, who are we to judge either Paul or Barnabas as being wholly right or wholly wrong in this matter?
8. For out of this sharp disagreement came two missionary parties instead of one. Do you remember Romans 8:28 where Paul wrote, all things work together for good for those who are called?
9. Barnabas took John Mark and sailed for Cyprus. Remember, Cyprus was where Barnabas was from. The story line of Acts follows Paul, so we don't have a record of the journey of Barnabas and Mark.
10. However, in Paul's later epistles, he mentions both of them in a positive manner.
11. Paul chose Silas as his traveling partner, and they went in the opposite direction, going overland through northern Syria and the province of Cilicia.  
*Acts 15:41 And he went through Syria and Cilicia, confirming the churches.*
12. **[Antioch, Syria, and Cilicia map]** I find it an interesting point that the next chapter says Paul ends up back at Lystra, the city where he was stoned to death!