

The Jerusalem Council **Acts 15:1-29**

Introduction:

1. Here we have the record of the first major dispute between the followers of Christ. It involved believers in the church at Antioch and believers in the church at Jerusalem.
2. Here was the problem in a nutshell: Many Jewish believers were teaching that the Gentiles must be circumcised and keep the Jewish law in order to be saved. vs. 1, 24
3. In other words, Gentiles must become proselytes into the Jewish religion or they could not be saved. This caused all kinds of questions. There was a time when this was correct doctrine, but had things changed now, with the raising up of the apostle Paul?
 - Could Gentiles be saved apart from the Jewish law?
 - Did Gentiles have to be circumcised?
 - Was it right for Jews to consider uncircumcised men as the people of God? After all, these Gentiles had abandoned idolatry and worshiped Christ.
4. Satan meant all this for the harm and destruction of the early church, but God used it all for the ultimate good of the church.
5. There would end up being a council at Jerusalem that would settle this matter. The outcome would be that Paul's ministry and message would be officially recognized and accepted.
6. This is an extremely important passage of Scripture. Because of its incredible importance, we will look at it in a verse-by-verse fashion. We must study this passage in conjunction with Galatians 2, which also details events that happened at this council.

The issue at hand – How is a person saved? vs. 1

1. Men had come all the way from Jerusalem to Antioch. This was a long and hard trip. What was their purpose? They desired to set straight this church composed of Jews and Gentiles.
2. Their intent wasn't to simply stay for a few days, but rather to carry on a lengthy period of teaching. Being from the church at Jerusalem would give them a great deal of prestige, and undoubtedly many of the believers in Antioch invited them into their homes.
3. Remember, these Gentiles had placed their faith and trust in Jesus Christ. But now these Jewish teachers began teaching them that they could not be saved unless they were also circumcised.
 - Circumcision was the seal of God's covenant with Israel and had become representative of the whole Old Testament law system. vs. 24
 - So, they were basically telling these Gentiles that they had to become circumcised, law-keeping proselytes into Judaism to truly be saved.

4. This, of course, was in direct opposition to the teaching of salvation by grace alone.
 - What do we learn from this? Ever since the days of the early church, groups have attempted to add something else to the gospel of salvation by grace alone. Today, groups add baptism, confirmation classes, church membership, penance, good deeds, and other things to the requirements for salvation.

Paul and Barnabas agree to go to the church at Jerusalem. vs. 2-3

1. When these Jews began teaching their doctrine of salvation, it was a direct assault upon the ministry and message of Paul and Barnabas.
2. Paul and Barnabas had finished their first missionary journey and planted many churches, predominantly Gentile. They had preached a message of salvation by grace through faith in Christ alone. Acts 13:38-39, 43
3. So, if these teachers from Jerusalem were right, then the result would be:
 - Paul and Barnabas had been preaching a soul-destroying heresy.
 - Their missionary journey was an utter failure.
 - Paul's entire ministry would be discredited.
4. If they could prove Paul wrong, they could effectively stop his work and gain his converts to be their own disciples.
5. So, it's easy to understand why the events of verse 2 occurred. Paul and Barnabas locked horns with the Judaizers right away.
 - Dissention – controversy; uproar; uprising
 - Disputation – They argued, and debated, and discussed these issues.
6. The debate waged back and forth in all its fury until the church at Antioch was torn asunder, confused, and rendered almost wholly ineffective. This was Satan's answer to Paul's evangelism. Fill the church with strife, get them bickering and fighting each other.
 - Isn't it noteworthy that there is no record of any missionary activity or souls being saved during this time?
7. Finally, the church decided to send a delegation of men to the church at Jerusalem to settle the issue there. We don't know for sure how many went, but we know there were at least three.
 - Paul – This only made sense since it was his message and ministry being called into question.
 - Barnabas – Great choice because he had originally belonged to the church at Jerusalem and was a Jewish Levite by birth, yet understood Paul's message of grace.
 - Titus, an uncircumcised Greek – An example of a dedicated saint that would demonstrate to the church at Jerusalem that a Gentile could be saved and have his life radically changed by Christ without being circumcised. Galatians 2:1
8. Let it be understood that Paul did not go to Jerusalem because he was subject to the apostles there. Paul had full authority from the Lord, entirely apart from the twelve.

- He had already been saved, been given a special commission and message from the Lord, been sent out on his first missionary journey in which he planted churches all over the place, and been used to turn great numbers of Gentiles to the Lord.
 - He did all of this apart from the twelve and without looking to Jerusalem for direction.
9. But Paul realized this issue had to be settled once and for all, or it would keep dogging him. So, in practical terms, the best way to do it was a face-to-face meeting in Jerusalem.
 10. Also, God revealed to Paul that it was His direct will for him to go to Jerusalem. Galatians 2:1-2 “*By revelation...*”
 11. On the way to Jerusalem they visited several churches and told them of all that God had done among the Gentiles. What an encouragement it must have been when these churches rejoiced in what God had done. vs. 3

Paul and Barnabas have an initial meeting with the church at Jerusalem. vs. 4-6

1. In verse 4, they arrived in Jerusalem and were welcomed by the church and leaders. They gave a report to the church of their missionary activities.
 - What a meeting this must have been.
 - Can you imagine hearing these mighty warriors for God telling of their experiences in getting the good news of God’s grace out to the heathen?
2. But there was a group in the church who weren’t getting blessed by Paul’s report – the Pharisees! vs. 5
3. Why weren’t they getting blessed? Because as they heard Paul telling about all these Gentiles getting saved, they didn’t believe they were really saved. They thought they had to be circumcised and keep the law of Moses.
4. Now that the Pharisees had challenged Paul publicly, it was time for the big showdown (vs. 6). All of the apostles and elders would come together, hear both sides, and make a decision on which direction the church would go. Their decision would forever impact the church.

Peter addresses the Jerusalem Council. vs. 7-11

1. According to vs. 7, there was a lot of arguing and squabbling in this meeting, but then finally Peter stood up.
 - What a difference from his earlier days of being the **first** to speak and talking without thinking. We see a different, more mature Peter.
2. Nobody could speak with more authority than Peter. He was the leader of the twelve and was known as the apostle to the circumcision. Galatians 2:7-8
3. Which side would Peter take? Where would Peter land on this issue - on the side of the Pharisees or the side of the apostle Paul?
 - According to Galatians 2:11, Paul had rebuked Peter at Antioch for his attitudes towards the Gentiles believers. When Peter stood up to talk, Paul must have looked at him with a raised brow. Had he learned his lesson or was he resentful towards Paul for the way he had rebuked him?

- Peter had learned his lesson and knew that Paul was right, and in this speech we have Peter at his very best.
4. Right away, Peter reminds everybody that it was by his mouth that the Gentiles first heard the gospel and believed (vs. 7). This, of course, is a reference to the conversion of Cornelius in Acts 10. Peter reminds them of several things:
 - The Gentiles received the Holy Spirit, just as the Jewish believers had. vs. 8
 - God put no difference between the Gentile and Jewish believers, giving them the same undeniable sign of the baptism of the Holy Spirit. vs. 9a
 - God had purified their hearts by faith apart from the Jewish law. vs. 9b
 5. So, if God didn't demand circumcision, and the Jewish law as a prerequisite to Gentile salvation, then how dare anyone else add them?
 - Paul must have breathed a sigh of relief and his heart must have warmed to Peter like never before.
 6. God had given Peter the experience with Cornelius and his household with this very council in mind. God knew that Peter could bear witness to the simple facts he had observed and so confirm Paul's ministry.
 7. Peter's conclusion was that it was ridiculous to put the yoke of the law on these Gentile believers' necks when the Jews themselves couldn't even keep the law. vs. 10
 8. Peter ends his remarks with an incredible statement in verse 11.
 - This could not be clearer. Salvation is by grace alone, not of the law. Paul must have beamed from ear to ear.
 - Law puts the load on man; grace puts the load on Christ.
 - Grace and law are incompatible when it comes to salvation. We are either saved by law, which depends on us accumulating our own merits, or we are saved by grace, which depends on our accepting the merits of Christ.

Paul and Barnabas address the Jerusalem Council. vs. 12

1. Peter's words were the perfect introduction to Barnabas and Paul. Now they would stand and tell of their missionary trip to the regions of Cyprus and Galatia.
2. They must have told of the many Gentile conversions whose lives were transformed by the gospel of Christ, Gentiles who had been won to Christ out of lives of paganism, wickedness, and sin. Paul probably used Titus as "Exhibit A."
3. Then they must have told about how they returned to these cities and confirmed the disciples and ordained elders and organized them into local churches.
4. All of this gave more support and credence to Peter's words – that salvation was by grace, not works.
5. One side note: Paul and Barnabas also declared the miracles and wonders God had done through them among the Gentiles. This was to confirm to these Jewish hearers that their ministry was of God. This would carry great weight with the Jews because "*the Jews require a sign.*" 1 Corinthians 1:22
6. This is why Paul was given the power to work miracles in his early ministry in the book of Acts. It was to demonstrate to the church (predominantly Jewish) that he had been given a special commission by God and the signs and miracles would convince them to recognize and accept this.

James declares the final conclusion. vs. 13-19

1. James had risen to a prominent place of leadership in the church at Jerusalem. This is interesting, given the fact that he wasn't one of the twelve and did not become a believer until after the resurrection. This occurred for several reasons:
 - James was the physical half brother of Jesus Christ. Galatians 1:19
 - Peter was gone from Jerusalem for quite a while during Acts 9-10, and this could have been when James took the leadership of the church.
2. When James spoke, he made reference to Peter's speech concerning Peter going to the house of Cornelius. vs. 14
3. He also lends support to Peter's testimony by quoting a prophecy from Amos 9:11-12.
 - This prophecy involves the rise of the nation of Israel in the millennial kingdom, with the Gentiles also being blessed and called out.
 - While this prophecy deals with things to come still in the future, James simply pointed out that the Word of God does teach that God will call out a group of Gentiles and bless them. The idea of Gentile salvation is a biblical concept, even in prophecy.
4. In verse 19, James puts it all in a nutshell and says, "Do not trouble these Gentile believers." What did he mean?
 - He simply meant that the Gentile believers do not have to be circumcised and keep the Jewish law in order to be saved.
 - James supported the doctrine that Paul had proclaimed – that salvation is by grace through faith alone! Galatians 5:6
 - James is saying, "The Judaizers are wrong, and Paul's message is right!"
5. It is interesting that James uses the words, "*trouble not them.*" Legalism troubles souls, but grace does not. Grace sets people free. Galatians 5:1, 10

James gives a word of warning to the Gentile believers. vs. 20-21

1. James suggests that the Gentile believers be sensitive and compassionate to their Jewish brethren. They needed to be careful not to antagonize, shock, or offend the Jewish believers with their liberty from the law. Paul also taught this same principle. Galatians 5:13-14; 1 Corinthians 10:23; Romans 14:13-16, 21
2. If the Gentiles used their liberty carelessly and without restraint, it could create a real wedge between brethren and drive the Jewish believers away.
3. In view of this, James suggests that the Gentiles abstain from four things:
 - Eating meat that had been offered to idols – Much of the meat for sale in Gentile markets had been ritually offered to idols. The meat, of course, was not polluted, and eating it did not pollute the person, but the Jews so abhorred idolatry that this would really bother them.
 - Eating things strangled or blood – The Jews were absolutely forbidden to eat any meat where blood remained in it. They believed the blood belonged on the altar only (this would include things strangled because it would not have had its blood drained from it).

- Fornication – The Gentile believers came from idolatrous backgrounds where sexual sin was part of their religion. James reminds them to keep their morals holy. Liberty is not a license to sin. Grace does not open the door to lawlessness in conduct. Paul always emphasized this to the church. Ephesians 5:3-4

The church at Jerusalem sends word to the Gentile churches of their decision. vs. 22-30

1. The church at Jerusalem decided to put in writing their decision. They selected four men to carry the letter to the Gentile churches.
 - Of course, Paul and Barnabas were chosen. It would have looked strange if not.
 - Judas and Silas were also chosen. These men were spiritual leaders in the church at Jerusalem.
 - It was very wise to include these two men. This would help to authenticate the decision and give credence to the letter. Some might have accused Paul and Barnabas of forgery otherwise.
2. The letter completely repudiated the Judaizers' teaching and supported the doctrine of grace preached by Paul and Barnabas, as well as giving a glowing testimony of Paul and Barnabas' personal lives. vs. 26
3. These four appointed ambassadors traveled to Antioch and gathered the church together. Can you imagine the anticipation? They are sitting there waiting to see if they are truly saved or not! This verdict could forever change their lives.

The letter is read to the church at Antioch. vs. 31-35

1. I would love to have been there when this letter was read.
2. The Bible says, "*They rejoiced for the consolation.*"
3. You can understand why they rejoiced. Their salvation had been put in question by the legalists. But now they learn that the legalism was false teaching, and that when they believed on Jesus Christ they were saved.
4. Judas and Silas also exhort the church (vs. 32), then Judas went back to Jerusalem, but Silas decided to stay. vs. 33-34
5. Finally, now that their issue was resolved, the work of God is rejuvenated. vs. 35
6. Satan desired to stop the progress of the work of God by causing trouble, contention, and strife in the church. He desired to get people sidetracked and preoccupied with the trouble instead of being able to concentrate on proclaiming the Word of God.