
Acts 15

Verses 12-21: James's Sentence -- The Tabernacle of David

Ministry Reading

Opening Reading -- Acts 15:12-21

Acts 15:12-21

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. And after they had held their peace, James answered, saying, Men and brethren, hearken unto me: Simeon hath declared how God at the first did visit the Gentiles, to take out of them a people for his name. And to this agree the words of the prophets; as it is written, After this I will return, and will build again the tabernacle of David, which is fallen down; and I will build again the ruins thereof, and I will set it up: that the residue of men might seek after the Lord, and all the Gentiles, upon whom my name is called, saith the Lord, who doeth all these things. Known unto God are all his works from the beginning of the world. Wherefore my sentence is, that we trouble not them, which from among the Gentiles are turned to God: but that we write unto them, that they abstain from pollutions of idols, and from fornication, and from things strangled, and from blood.

Barnabas and Paul: Two Witnesses

After Peter's testimony, the whole multitude fell silent and listened to Barnabas and Paul declare the miracles and wonders God had wrought among the Gentiles

through them. They were not interrupted. They gave a full accounting of how God had placed His stamp of approval upon the free gospel preached to the Gentiles -- and when they had finished, they held their peace. Then James spoke.

James appears to have been the principal leader at Jerusalem at this time, and was almost certainly one of the Lord's brothers in the flesh -- one of those who had not believed on Him before the cross. His weight and standing in that assembly were considerable. And he directs them to listen carefully to what he is about to say.

The Purpose of the Amos Quotation

James's quotation from Amos -- about building again the tabernacle of David that is fallen down, so that the residue of men might seek after the Lord, and all the Gentiles upon whom His name is called -- has often been misunderstood as a direct fulfillment in the present church age. That is to miss James's actual point entirely.

The passage James quotes is millennial in character, like the generality of such Old Testament citations. James is not claiming that the church is fulfilling Amos 9. He is establishing a simple principle: it is not inconsistent with the word of God for God to save Gentiles. That is the thrust of the quotation. There could be no ground of complaint that God was doing among the Gentiles what Peter and Paul and Barnabas had reported, because the Old Testament itself had said that in connection with the establishment of the house of David -- pointing to Christ, the Son of David, ruling in the coming millennium -- Gentiles would seek after the Lord. The saving of Gentiles is not a surprise. It was already there in the prophets.

Known from Eternity: Verse 18

Verse 18, in Darby's rendering, is simply: 'known from eternity.' What God is doing in saving Gentiles through the gospel is not a contingency plan, not an unexpected development that caught Him by surprise. All His works are known to Him from eternity. It is worth noting the contrast of expressions: things connected with Israel and with the earth are described as from 'the foundation of the world'; things connected with the church and the heavenly purpose are from 'before the foundation of the world.' The phrase 'from eternity' in verse 18 encompasses all, but the distinction in other passages is instructive -- God's earthly purpose for Israel established from the foundation of the world, and His heavenly purpose for the church purposed before it began.

James's Sentence: Not Troubling the Gentiles

James's conclusion, stated with the authority of one who had heard the testimony and was carrying the mind of the assembly, is plain: 'Wherefore my sentence is, that we trouble not them, which from among the Gentiles are turned to God.' The question about circumcision for Gentile believers was settled. They were not to be required to be circumcised or to keep the law of Moses. The Jewish question -- what believing Jews should do in relation to the Mosaic practices -- was not directly addressed at this point. God bore long patience with those who had believed among the Jews, not requiring them immediately to set aside all the Mosaic forms. It was only just before the Roman armies destroyed Jerusalem that the Epistle to the Hebrews was written, calling the Jewish believers to go outside the camp entirely.

Circumcision in the Millennium: Jew and Gentile Distinguished

It is worth noting that the Old Testament does not say that Gentiles in the millennium will be circumcised. Circumcision was the mark of covenant relationship between God and Israel. In the millennium, that distinction between

Jew and Gentile will be maintained. The reason it cannot be maintained now is that we are a heavenly people in Christ, in whom there is neither circumcision nor uncircumcision but a new creation. Jews and Gentiles who are in Christ are all one -- the distinction that pertained under the law has no place in the new creation.

In the millennium the believing Jews will enter the good of what circumcision always pointed to: the cutting off of the flesh in the power of the Spirit, fully realized. But millennial saints -- both Jewish and Gentile -- will not be 'in Christ' in the sense in which believers are now. They will have the forgiveness of sins, they will be born again, they will be children of God; but the distinctive heavenly position of being united to the glorified head in heaven by the indwelling Holy Spirit is the special privilege of the church of this present dispensation. The things we have in Christ are of a different and higher order.

The Tribulation Saints: Revelation 7

Revelation 7 sets before us two classes of persons who pass through the great tribulation. The first half of the chapter shows 144,000 sealed from the twelve tribes of Israel. The second half shows a great multitude which no man can number, out of all nations, who have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb -- coming out of 'the tribulation, the great one,' as the Greek strongly expresses it. These Gentile believers appear to have responded to the preaching of the gospel of the kingdom, which is placed in abeyance during the present age but will be taken up again by a Jewish remnant after the church is gone -- just as Matthew 10 had originally sent the twelve to the lost sheep of the house of Israel, and Matthew 24 points to a renewed witness in those days.

As to the 144,000, whether the number is to be taken with strict literality or whether the repeated twelves of Revelation carry a symbolic weight -- as they do in the description of the heavenly city where twelve appears throughout -- is a

question that need not be settled here. What is clear is that there will be a large number of sealed Jewish believers, some of whom will be killed (we see them under the altar in Revelation 6 crying for the avenging of their blood), and some of whom will be preserved through the tribulation to enter the millennium. The Lord's promise -- 'he that endureth to the end shall be saved' in Matthew 24 -- speaks of enduring to the end of the tribulation, not to the end of life in general.

All Israel Shall Be Saved

As to those who enter the millennium, the Old Testament speaks with remarkable clarity. Isaiah 60:21: 'Thy people also shall be all righteous.' Romans 11:26: 'And so all Israel shall be saved.' Ezekiel 20 describes the Lord bringing His scattered people into the wilderness and pleading with them and purging out the rebels from among them, so that every last one who enters the millennial blessing under the covenant will be saved. The process of purging ensures that the number who actually enter may be smaller than we might suppose, but those who do enter will all be the Lord's. Zechariah speaks of two-thirds of the Jews in the land being cut off in that day of tribulation, with the remaining third brought through the fire, refined, and calling upon the name of the Lord.

For the Gentile nations entering the millennium, the picture is different. They have no specific covenant guaranteeing their perpetuity in salvation through their generations. The Book of Revelation warns that at the end of the thousand years, when Satan is loosed, a multitude will go up against the camp of the saints. Salvation, as always, is a divine operation -- not a question of merely outward influences, however great those may be. The fact that Jerusalem is restored, the Shekinah is present, and the nations are under the righteous rule of Christ does not guarantee the salvation of everyone born in the millennium. It happened before with Israel; it will happen again.

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Lord willing.