Acts 15

Verses 1-11: The Jerusalem Council -- The Question Joined

Ministry Reading

Opening Reading -- Acts 15:1-11

Acts 15:1-11

And certain men which came down from Judea taught the brethren, and said, Except ye be circumcised after the manner of Moses, ye cannot be saved. 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. And being brought on their way by the church, they passed through Phenicia and Samaria, declaring the conversion of the Gentiles: and they caused great joy unto all the brethren... And when there had been much disputing, 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. And God, which knoweth the hearts, bare them witness, giving them the Holy Ghost, even as he did unto us; and put no difference between us and them, purifying their hearts by faith. 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? But we believe that through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ we shall be saved, even as they.

An Assembly Reaching a Decision

The thought that was particularly before us in this passage is found in verse 22: it pleased the apostles and elders with the whole assembly. Here we have an assembly of God gathered in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and reaching a decision. There are not many such examples in Scripture that give us any inside information on what happened. In the case of the mischievous man at Corinth, the assembly there made a decision and acted on it, but all we have is Paul's letter before the action and his second epistle after it. We have no account of what was said and done in the assembly itself. Here in Acts 15 we are given a remarkable degree of detail: the words of Peter, the words of James, the reasoning that was used, and what flowed from the whole proceeding.

Every case that comes before an assembly of God is different. There is no set formula to be applied mechanically. And yet, because this chapter gives us more internal detail than any other assembly proceeding in the New Testament, it must contain things that are for our learning -- principles that can be gleaned for our instruction in how such matters ought to be handled.

A Doctrinal Question of Far-Reaching Significance

The issue was no minor matter. It touched the whole character of Christianity and the doctrines Paul had been preaching. Was salvation by grace alone through faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, or was it dependent upon circumcision and the keeping of the law of Moses? The whole Epistle to the Galatians would later be written to address the same kind of issue, showing how wide its implications were. This was not a question that could be left unresolved.

Paul went up to Jerusalem by revelation -- the Lord Himself communicated to him that this was where the matter was to be settled, not in Antioch. God was supervising all the events and overseeing the outcome. He was not going to allow the church to split into a Gentile church and a Jewish church. He had already acted similarly when the Samaritans believed: He withheld the gift of the Holy

Spirit until the apostles came down from Jerusalem and laid hands on them, so that no independent Samaritan church would be established. Samaria had once before set up something independent of the divine center at Jerusalem, as we remember from the Lord's conversation with the woman at the well. God acted to prevent a repetition of that pattern now in connection with the Gentiles.

Titus: A Living Test Case

Among the company that went up to Jerusalem was Titus -- an uncircumcised Greek believer, saved under Paul's ministry. Galatians 2:3 tells us he was neither compelled to be circumcised. Paul was not presenting a merely theoretical question to the assembly at Jerusalem. He brought Titus with him, so that the question could not be handled in the abstract. Titus was there. What were they going to say to him? What were they going to do? This gave the matter an immediacy that forced it to be dealt with practically, not merely theoretically.

It should also be noted that myriads -- the word means ten thousand -- of Jewish believers existed by this time. The question before the Jerusalem assembly was not a small one. It affected an enormous number of people, and rumors were already circulating about Paul, claiming that he was teaching Jews to apostatize from Moses. He was teaching no such thing. But these Pharisees who had believed were now pressing the issue directly: the Gentiles must be circumcised and commanded to keep the law of Moses.

Phoenicia and Samaria: Joy at the Conversion of the Gentiles

The route from Antioch to Jerusalem passed through Phoenicia and Samaria. Phoenicia is the territory of the ancient Philistines -- a people who were for so long at war with Israel. What a triumph of the grace of God that in the country of the Philistines, the declaration of the conversion of the Gentiles could now be made. And Samaria, settled by Gentile peoples brought in by the king of Assyria

when the ten tribes were carried captive -- these were intrinsically Gentiles by ancestry. The news of the conversion of the Gentiles was exactly what both Phoenicia and Samaria needed to hear. And it caused great joy to all the brethren.

The travelers did not sneak through these cities, avoiding contact because the question had not yet been resolved at Jerusalem. They were members of one body, passing through places where there were other members of that same body. They declared the conversion of the Gentiles and caused great joy. Being set on their way by the assembly at Antioch was an expression of practical fellowship -- the assembly there was fully in sympathy with what Paul and Barnabas were going for. It answers to the principle in 3 John 6: 'Whom if thou bring forward on their journey after a godly sort, thou shalt do well.'

At Jerusalem: Not an Abstract Debate

When they arrived at Jerusalem, the welcome was warm: they declared all things that God had done with them. Paul, going up by revelation, was looking to the guidance of the Spirit to bring this out in accordance with the truth of the gospel as he had been preaching it. He had been preaching the gospel freely to the Gentiles, without any of the Judaistic elements attached -- and this independent, sovereign work of God among the Gentiles was what he had to set before them.

Then arose the opposition: certain of the sect of the Pharisees who believed -- the same sect from which Paul himself came. He knew their mind well. And their position was: circumcise them, and command them to keep the law of Moses. This is exactly the issue that had been brought from Antioch. And now, with Titus standing there in the room, uncircumcised, the question was absolutely concrete: what are you going to say to this man?

Peter's Testimony: God Made Choice

Acts 15:7-11

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. And God, which knoweth the hearts, bare them witness, giving them the Holy Ghost, even as he did unto us; and put no difference between us and them, purifying their hearts by faith. 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? But we believe that through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ we shall be saved, even as they.

Peter's opening words are carefully chosen: 'God made choice.' Not Peter, not the apostles, not any ecclesiastical process. God chose that the Gentiles by Peter's mouth should hear the gospel and believe. God bore them witness by giving them the Holy Spirit just as He had given it at Pentecost. God put no difference between Jew and Gentile. God purified their hearts by faith. The sovereignty of God in all of it is emphasized at every point.

And Peter's challenge is unanswerable: why do you tempt God by putting on these Gentile disciples a yoke that neither our fathers nor we were able to bear? If the law could not save Israel -- and it could not -- then to insist on imposing it upon the Gentiles as a condition of salvation is to tempt God. The conclusion is equally clear: we believe that through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ we shall be saved, even as they. Jews and Gentiles alike are saved by grace alone through faith -- not by works of the law.

Messianic Congregations: The Same Question Raised Again

What those Pharisees who believed were insisting upon at Jerusalem is being raised again in our own day by what are called Messianic congregations, which have spread widely over the past several decades. They are not generally saying that Gentile believers must be circumcised, but they insist that Jewish believers

must maintain the Mosaic practices, and that Gentile brethren who wish to participate with them are welcome to come and join them in those observances. It sounds generous. But it misunderstands the great change that has come in with the death and resurrection of Christ, and it fails to reckon with passages like Philippians 3:3 -- 'we are the circumcision, who have no confidence in the flesh' -- and Galatians 6:15 -- 'circumcision avails nothing, and uncircumcision avails nothing, but a new creation.' The issue at Acts 15 has not lost its relevance.

* * *

Lord willing.