

Acts 15

Acts fifteen begins the last half of the history of the Apostles. It records a significant chapter as it continues to unfold the advance of the Gentiles in the gospel. Acts 10, 11 tell of the miracles that established that Gentiles had a place in the kingdom. Acts 11 tells of the beginning of the church in Antioch, destined to become the center of Gentile Christians. Acts 13 and 14 tell of Paul's intense activities in spreading the gospel among the Gentiles and Acts 15 is a milestone in that it shows that Gentile Christians were not bound to circumcise their sons nor keep the law of Moses. It was a signal victory, but an edict which would be tested many times and would occasion much teaching by Paul, both written and without doubt oral, as he strongly resisted efforts of men who taught otherwise.

Satan does not take defeat sitting down. When the seventy returned and recounted their success, Jesus said, "I beheld Satan fallen as lightning from heaven" (Lk. 10:17f). He meant by this that their preaching and the subjection of demons to them in the name of Christ was a great blow to Satan's power. Hebrews two records the death-blow given Satan by Jesus. Jesus took on himself flesh and blood that "through death he might bring to naught him that had the power of death, that is, the devil, and might deliver all them who through fear of death were all their lifetime subject to bondage" (Heb. 2:14f). Still, Satan has not yet been cast into the eternal fire prepared for him and his angels (Matt. 25:41). He fights a losing battle, but carries many mortals to ruin with him. He is cunning, sly and the events of Acts 15 reveal his constant efforts to bring man into subjection to himself.

The Gentiles had had the freedom of the gospel proclaimed unto them. And certain men came down from Judaea and taught the brethren, saying, "Except ye be circumcised after the custom of Moses ye cannot be saved" (Acts 15:1). Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and quarreling with them. Such teaching contradicted what Paul had preached among Gentiles in his first journey. He had taught "...through this man is proclaimed unto you remission of sins; and by him everyone that believeth is justified from all things, from which you could not be justified by the law of Moses" (Acts 13:38f).

Still, although the brethren knew the Holy Spirit had separated Barnabas and Paul for the journey they just had returned from (thus approving their teaching), there was something unsettling about the claims of these men from Judaea. To settle the issue the church sent Paul and Barnabas

to Jerusalem to inquire of brethren there about the matter. In addition, the Holy Spirit directed Paul to go up to the church there (Gal. 2:2). Along the way the apostles rehearsed the conversion of the Gentiles (Acts 15:3). The brethren from Antioch arrived Jerusalem and were received of the church, apostles and elders. They rehearsed the conversion of the Gentiles and the "battle" was joined: "There rose up certain of the sect of the Pharisees who believed, saying, it is needful to circumcise them and charge them to keep the law of Moses" (Acts 15:5).

The two evangelists had testified of their work among the Gentiles and "all things God had done with them" (15:4). This "all things" would have included the miracles God had wrought through them; smiting Elymas with blindness (13:11); the healing of the lame man (Acts 14:8f) and other signs and wonders wrought by them (14:3). Signs and wonders proved the speakers were from God (Jn. 3:1; 9:33; 20:31f; Mk. 16:20; Heb. 2:4). When Paul and Barnabas rehearsed that God had wrought miracles through their hands, they claimed that God endorsed their message as well: i.e. that Gentiles were not bound to circumcise their sons. So the apostles and elders were gathered together to discuss this matter and much questioning was done. Then Peter arose to speak. God had made choice among them that he should preach to the Gentiles the gospel that they might believe. God who knows the heart, bore them witness and gave them the Holy Spirit just as He had the Jews at Pentecost. God made no distinction between Jew and Gentile; He had cleansed their hearts by faith. All this being true, Peter warned the Judazing teachers they were trying God by imposing a yoke upon the Gentiles' neck which neither living nor dead Jews had been able to bear. Jews were saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus (not through circumcision and the keeping of Moses' law) just as Gentiles were (Acts 15:7-11). When Peter concluded, Barnabas and Paul cited again the signs and wonders God had wrought through them: God's approved their message because He approved the messengers.

Finally, James arose to speak. James was not an apostle, but is believed to have been the Lord's brother, author of the book of James and brother of Jude. He was highly respected and called "James the Just." Apparently Judazing teachers felt he sympathized with them, but they were mistaken. He refers to Peter's labors through which "God visited the Gentiles to take out of them a people for his name" (Acts 15:14). Then James quoted Amos 9:11f to show that salvation of the Gentiles was predicted by the Holy Spirit. The prophecy relates how God promised to rebuild the tabernacle of David and set it up again that the residue of men might seek after the Lord, and the Gentiles upon whom God's name

was called (Acts 15:13-18). Restoring the tabernacle of David refers to God giving Jesus the throne of David and through His gospel Gentiles had God's name called upon them. Premilennialists erroneously look to a future, earthly of Christ in fulfillment of this prophecy. James said it was fulfilled in the conversion of the Gentiles.

James concluded saying, "My judgment is that we trouble not them that from among the Gentiles turn to God" (15:19). Paul and Barnabas were vindicated. Their teaching was correct and the Judaizing teachers were wrong! Still, there were exhortations for Gentiles from James. Four things were enjoined upon the Gentiles which already were practiced by the Jews, which they had practiced even under the first covenant. They were to "abstain from the pollution of idols, and from fornication, and from things strangled, and from blood" (15:19f). It was agreed upon by the whole church, and they chose men to accompany Paul and Barnabas to give their personal testimony that the letter was given. This is called "judgment" in Acts 15:19; "decree" in Acts 16:4 and that which was from the Holy Spirit, Himself (15:28). It was an inspired decree for Christians then and Christians today.

The witnesses, Paul and Barnabas read the epistle to the church at Antioch and when done, the church rejoiced for the consolation of it (Acts 15:30).

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