

The Book of Acts / The History of the Apostles

Lesson 51 – Acts 15:1-35 – The Council at Jerusalem Part 1

INTRODUCTION

We are fresh off Paul's first missionary journey, during which Paul and Barnabas traveled for nearly two years and traversed over 1,100 miles, bringing the good news of Jesus Christ to both Jews and Gentiles in entire regions and prominent cities in Asia Minor (modern-day Turkey). Paul establishes doctrine for these fledgling assemblies, structured leadership, and chooses elders to lead them.

Paul and Barnabas return to Antioch, Syria, to report to the assembly there. They report “all that God has done with and how He opened a door of faith to the Gentiles.” Notice the humility of Paul and Barnabas. They sacrificed much, traveled far, and Paul was even stoned, yet they gave God credit for the work. Why?

1. It is the Message of Jesus Christ
2. It is the Will of God
3. It is the Power of the Holy Spirit

ACTS 15:1-2 – THE ISSUE

Some men came down from Judea and *began* teaching the brethren, “Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.” And when Paul and Barnabas had great dissension and debate with them, *the brethren* determined that Paul and Barnabas and some others of them should go up to Jerusalem to the apostles and elders concerning this issue.

This chapter discusses the first universal theological problem. We need to be very clear about the question to understand the debate, the conference, and the solution. The issue is found in the first two verses.

The setting is the same from the end of chapter 14. They are in Antioch, Syria. Paul and Barnabas are rejoicing and encouraging the brethren, sharing story after story about how God provided opportunities for them to share the Gospel. When in the midst of joy, there is an envoy that arrives from Judea, teaching the brethren.

Who are these men?

1. Acts 15:5 – They echo the thoughts of Pharisees who had believed
2. Galatians 2:11-13 – From James, Party of the Circumcision
3. Acts 15:24 – They are from the community of the Apostles
4. They are fellow believers – If they were false brethren, false prophets, or antichrists, Paul and Barnabas would not allow them to teach, they would not have had influence upon Peter and Barnabas, and Paul would not debate them; he would refute them.

They are teaching the brethren (Acts 11:19-30; 12:25). This group of believers, these brethren, have been known to the Jerusalem brethren for over three years. They have been

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supported by the brethren in Jerusalem spiritually, and they have supported the brethren in Jerusalem physically. The two groups are well known to each other.

They are teaching – the word teaching is “**διδάσκω** didaskō,” which means to instruct. This is not the same as “proclaim,” which would indicate an evangelistic message. These men are teaching the brethren, known believers, and they are teaching them as fellow believers.

What is their message?

Unless – Literally “if not (ean mē)” this is very emphatic and these men are saying that this is a disqualifying inaction.

Circumcised - **περιτέμνω** peritemno – Biblical Jewish circumcision, known as *brit milah* in Hebrew, is a religious ritual rooted in the Torah, specifically Genesis 17:10-14, where God commands Abraham to circumcise himself and all males in his household as a sign of the covenant between God and the Jewish people. It involves the surgical removal of the foreskin from the male anatomy. The procedure is seen as a physical act demonstrating the spiritual commitment to the covenant, symbolizing dedication to God and inclusion in the Nation of Israel.

According to the custom of Moses – the word custom is “**ἔθος** ethos” which means “that which is prescribed.” This is not a perversion of the Law but the actual letter of the Law given at Mount Sinai.

You cannot be saved – Literally “not able to be saved”

Negative Particle “**οὐ** ou” with the verb “**δύναμαι** dunamai” and the infinitive “**σῶζω** sozo.” They are being very clear in their teaching, stating very demonstratively a doctrine that they believe to be true.

Earlier in this lesson, we saw that this was in unison with the believing Pharisees but was not being taught by the Apostles nor by James. This particular doctrine appears to be something that was grandfathered in.

We know that the word “saved” has many applications, depending on the context of the passage. We ask, “saved from what?” However, there is not much context here. We have verse 11, and we see that it is by grace that salvation is granted. But we know that eternal life has always been by grace, and the Law has never been part of the equation.

In the context of the Jews’ interaction with the Gentiles, I think that this salvation is in the context of the Kingdom and Eschatology. To understand this, let’s review the Law concerning the Gentiles and why they would be told to be circumcised and follow the Law of Moses.

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Gentiles Added to Israel in the Hebrew Text

To be added to the nation of Israel and enjoy the benefits of an Israelite, the Hebrew Text outlines the following requirements for Gentiles:

- **Circumcision:** The primary requirement for Gentiles to fully participate in covenantal rituals (Passover, Temple Worship) is circumcision of all males in their household (Genesis 17:12-14, Exodus 12:48, Ezekiel 44:9). This act integrates them into the covenant community of Israel.
- **Residency and Integration:** Gentiles who live as *gerim* (resident aliens) among Israelites are to be treated as native-born (*ezrach*) in legal, social, and religious contexts (Leviticus 19:34, Numbers 15:16). This includes access to justice and economic protections (Deuteronomy 10:18-19, 24:14-15, 26:12-13).
- **Observance of Laws:** Gentiles who are added to Israel must follow the same laws as Israelites for religious practices, such as sacrifices or festivals (Numbers 9:14, 15:14-16). This implies adopting Israel's ethical and godly standards.
- **Benefits:** Upon meeting these conditions, Gentiles could:
 - Participate in key religious festivals (Passover, Sukkot).
 - Offer sacrifices and access the sanctuary (if circumcised and covenantally committed).
 - Receive social and economic protections, such as fair wages and provisions.
 - Be treated as equals in legal and communal matters, effectively functioning as Israelites in many respects.
 - Covenantal Participation and God's Protection
 - Kingdom Promises
 - Ezekiel 47:21-23
 - The use of *gerim* and *ezrach* in this context elevates the status of integrated Gentiles to that of Israelites, with *nachalah* (inheritance) indicating a permanent stake in God's promises to Israel.
 - Isaiah 56:3-8
 - Gentiles who align with God's covenant are promised access to the Temple, joy in worship, and inclusion in God's universal plan. Their offerings and sacrifices are accepted, indicating full participation in the covenantal blessings of the Kingdom. *Ben nekhar* (foreigner) here refers to Gentiles who commit to God, and *kol ha-amim* (all peoples) underscores the universal scope of God's Kingdom, including Gentiles.

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ACTS 15:1-2 – CONCLUSION

Some men came down from Judea and *began* teaching the brethren, “Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.” They were not teaching the brethren how to be reconciled to God; rather, they were teaching the brethren how to be included with Israel and come under the protection of Israel when the day of the Lord commences and the Kingdom is established.

According to the Law, this is reasonable and expected. In the eyes of believing Jews who are strict adherents to the Law, I can imagine them wondering why this was not already being taught and enforced. What they did not understand was the new concept of the Grace Economy. Even in Peter’s statement in verse 11, I believe that Peter had come to understand that the Kingdom was being granted to them by grace.

In Acts 15:2, the great dissension and debate were sincere; I am sure that the Men had the Law on their side. But Paul was an Apostle and was the spokesperson for the Lord. Where was Peter at this point? Maybe he had already left, maybe he had to build his courage, maybe he was weighing out everything, not sure. What we do know is that by the time they get to Jerusalem, Peter will have made up his mind on the side of the Lord.