

WEDNESDAY BIBLE STUDY- Acts Chapter 15 (ESV 1023)

Verse 1- While Paul and Barnabas were resting and enjoying the fellowship of the other disciples at Antioch following their first mission, some believers from Judea came to visit and teach. Unfortunately, their teaching did not agree with what Paul and Barnabas had been saying. They told the Gentiles that they could not be saved unless they would adopt the Jewish lifestyle completely, including circumcision, a ritual first established with Abraham by God. **(Genesis 17:9-14, ESV 13)** This was a promise or agreement between God and the Jewish nation to follow His laws. However, if we read a little further in the same chapter, we find that God himself did not include those who were not of the lineage of both Abraham and Sarah in this covenant. **(Genesis 17:18-21, ESV 13)** Moses passed down this law when he wrote this story and other accounts of their ancestors in the first five books of the Bible that became, “The Law of Moses.” So, this was fine until Jesus came to establish the new covenant.

Verse 2- Knowing that this was not part of the new covenant, Paul and Barnabas vehemently disagreed and debated with these Judeans about this. **(Jeremiah 31:31-34, ESV 736), (Luke 22:20, ESV 977)** This caused the people of the church at Antioch to appoint them to go with some others back to Jerusalem to meet with the apostles and elders (the leaders) to answer the question of who was right. **(Deuteronomy 32:7, ESV 193), (Proverbs 1: 5, ESV 586), (Proverbs 11:14, ESV 595)**

Verse 3 and 4- As they traveled through Phoenicia and Samaria on the way to Jerusalem, they told their stories of how many Gentiles were being saved, which was good news to all the believers, even those in Jerusalem. **(Mark 16:15, ESV 946)**

Verse 5 and 6- Unfortunately, though the Jewish believers accepted that Gentiles could be saved, some thought that true salvation could only take place if the Gentiles were forced to follow Jewish laws and traditions. This strong difference of opinion made it necessary to gather the apostles (those who actually walked with Jesus when he was alive) and the elders (those who knew the law and Jesus’ teaching well) to form a council to settle the debate. This was in fact the first church council, a body of members that helps to settle disputes and determine church policy today.

Verse 7 through 11- Peter recounted his experience with Cornelius as evidence that God did not require that Gentiles take on Jewish rituals in order to receive the Holy Spirit. **(Acts 10:34-35 and Acts 10:44-58, ESV 1018)**

Verse 12- Peter’s speech probably also reminded them of what God said to him in the vision when he told him to rise and eat from the animals that had previously been forbidden, “What God has called clean, do not call common.” **(Acts 10:10-16, ESV 1017)** In

any case, they got quiet and listened to Paul and Barnabas who told them of all the signs and wonders that God allowed them to do among the Gentiles. This was presented as proof that God approved and accepted them as they were.

Verse 13 through 17- Then, James (the leader of the Jews at that time, and the brother of Jesus) first reminded them that they were all part of the family of Christ by calling them “brethren.” Then, he validated what Peter (also called Simeon or Simon) had said by using a passage from the old prophets. (Amos 9:11-12, ESV 859) He knew that if anything would convince the Pharisees, it would be something from the old prophets. He said that this was proof that God intended the Gentiles to become his people just like the Jews.

Verse 18- It’s no coincidence that this verse is only one phrase. James stated that the inclusion of the Gentiles was God’s intention from the beginning. King James Version says, “Known unto God are all his works from the beginning of the world.” (Genesis 12:1-3, ESV 9-10), (Malachi 1:11, ESV 889-890)

Verse 19-21- For this reason, James took a stand for the side of Paul and Barnabas. He stated his judgment on the matter which was that the Jewish believers should do nothing that might hinder the Gentiles from coming to God, such as forcing them to be circumcised. He said that they would write to them about the things that they should abstain from. To abstain means to choose not to do something, or to avoid it. This meant Gentiles had a choice whether to follow the old Jewish principles or not. He felt that they would learn the laws of Moses anyway because the laws were read in the synagogues every Sabbath. So, they would learn the right practices as they came to worship. This was a clear acknowledgment that salvation from sin is not based on what scriptures one knows or what one does, but only on the blood of Jesus Christ. So, any suggestion that rituals or practices can save someone is hindering people from becoming part of God’s kingdom. Jesus specifically warned the Pharisees against this. (Matthew 23:13, ESV 919)

Verse 22-23- “The apostles and elders, with the whole church decided”. That means the body came to an agreement that what Peter and James spoke of would be the agreed practice of the church and they decided to send two witnesses from Judea with Paul and Barnabas as proof that this agreement as outlined in the letter was authentic (in other words there was no deception). It’s clear from the beginning of the letter that the objective was unity. It started by identifying the senders as “your brethren” (i.e. brothers and sisters in Christ). Then, two or three witnesses were provided to establish the truth, a practice that came from the early Jewish laws. (Deuteronomy 19:15) Then, the letter offered greetings not only to the Jews and Gentiles at Antioch, but also to those in Syria and Cilicia (where Paul and Barnabas had traveled). These beginning phrases showed just how much

importance was placed on the believers being on one accord. (Psalm 133, ESV 577), (John 17:20-23, ESV 1001)

Verse 24- Then, the reason for the letter was stated. Paraphrased: *We heard that some of our people came to you and said that you must be circumcised, “subverting your souls” (unsettling your faith). These people were totally unauthorized.* The actual Greek word used in this passage is “anaskeuazo” (an-ask-yoo-ad’-zo) which means to dismantle or plunder or to leave in total disarray. That means that the leaders were saying that those people who told the Gentiles this had caused them to be confused, to waiver in their faith and that was unacceptable. (Luke 17:1-2, ESV 970-971), (Romans 14:19-22, ESV 1051)

Verse 25-27- The letter explained the credentials of Paul and Barnabas as trustworthy because they had risked their own lives for the sake of the Lord Jesus Christ. (Luke 9:23-24, ESV 960), (Revelation 2:10, ESV 1129) Since Judas and Silas needed no introduction, we can assume that they were known as leaders in the Judean church, therefore, they were simply the representatives of the leaders at Judea. They were sent to confirm that the letter was indeed from the church leaders and elders.

Verse 28- The letter stated that their decision was led by the Holy Spirit. This was important because that is where Jesus had said they would get guidance. (John 16:13-15, ESV 1000), (Ezekiel 36:25-28, ESV 807)

Verse 29- The elders listed specific things that all believers were told to avoid because these would specifically do harm to their relationship with God because they were idolatry. Idols are anything that we revere or worship that is not God. Food and blood sacrifices to inanimate objects, animals or humans (including self-gratification) was an offense to God and should be avoided. The emphasis was that these practices were not the basis for salvation, but refraining from them was how one should live after salvation. (Exodus 20:3-6, ESV 68), (Colossians 3:5-6, ESV 1088), (Romans 1:20-25, ESV 1040)

Verse 30-31- When the message of unity and avoidance of unclean acts was delivered, the people read it and were encouraged. This represented something achievable because it was in keeping with the new covenant that Jesus presented. No longer was salvation based on outward obedience to rules and rituals, but on inward transformation and faith. (Jeremiah 31:31-33, ESV 736), (1 John 5:1-3, ESV 1125)

Verse 32-35- Judas and Silas stayed for some time to encourage and strengthen the believers until the believers seemed comfortable. Then, Silas decided to stay longer while Judas went home. Paul and Barnabas continued to teach and preach the word of the Lord. There was peace again for a while. (Romans 5:1-2, ESV 1043), (Ephesians 2:14-15, ESV 1079)

Verse 36- Paul and Barnabas agreed that they should return to the places of their first missionary journey to see how things were going. Paul later described his reason for this in his letter to the Thessalonians. (1 Thessalonians 2:11-12, ESV 1090)

Verse 37- Barnabas wanted to take John Mark with them again. Remember he went with them to help on the first journey but left to return to Jerusalem before their journey was over (Acts 13:13, ESV 1021).

Verse 38- Paul did not want to take John Mark this time because he felt that he had abandoned them on the first journey. Many of Paul's letters emphasize the importance he placed on completing God's work. (Philippians 1:4-6, ESV 1083), (2 Timothy 4:7, ESV 1099)

Verse 39-41- We do not know specific details of their positions (i.e. exactly what was said), but we know that there was strong disagreement. We know that the dissension was so strong that they felt that they could not go on together. Barnabas took Mark and went to Cyprus (the island where they began their first missionary journey and where Barnabas was from). Paul took Silas and went to Syria and Cilicia (the cities they had visited during the latter part of their first journey). There are some important things to note about how this disagreement was handled, although we are not given a lot of detail about it.

- Both parties went back to the churches that they had established during their first journey. They just traveled different routes.
- The disagreement had nothing to do with the fundamentals of the faith. Christ was still the focus of the ministry of both. They only disagreed about who should help deliver the message. This probably had to do more with personality than faith. Each had the same objective only with a different approach. Barnabas, "the encourager" was advocating for John Mark who was in fact his cousin (family), and young when they went on the first journey. It was typical for him to support the newer younger members of the team just as he advocated for Paul at the beginning of his ministry. Paul the educated proponent of the law and justice obviously felt that the younger man had proven himself unreliable since he had left them in the middle of their mission.
- Commentaries sometimes conclude that Barnabas and Mark did not have the sanction of the congregation, while Paul and Silas did, based on the phrase, "being recommended by the brethren unto the grace of God." However, if you read the entire thought, it starts with verse 39 and includes both parties, each going in a different direction, but could very well include both being sent by the congregation with a blessing for God's protection (which is what the phrase. "recommended unto the grace of God" means).

- The last phrase in verse 41 indicates the purpose that was to be served by all, the strengthening of the churches. Getting the gospel out and teaching the believers was more important than either side proving who was right. They agreed to disagree and moved on. Though this meant a temporary separation, we know that it was not permanent, because years later, Paul actually requested Mark's presence calling him a help to his ministry. (2 Timothy 4:11, ESV 1099). Paul also later advocated for financial support for Barnabas and himself in his letter to the Corinthians, showing his deep respect for the work that Barnabas was doing. (1 Corinthians 9:4-7, ESV 1058)

The two disputes that we read about in Chapter 15 had different resolutions, but came to the same result, the continued unity of the faith. Neither resolution completely changed the minds of either side. Instead in both cases, the furtherance of the gospel through the strengthening of the churches was given the ultimate importance. Focus was taken off of trivial things and placed on serving Christ. Paul's letter to the Romans later outlined this very thought. (Romans 14:17-19, ESV 1051) Perhaps that is why God gave us a new covenant, a new way of salvation. He took the emphasis off of what we do and placed it on why we do it. (John 14:15, ESV 998), (1 John 2:5, ESV 1123), (1 John 4:19-21, ESV 1125)

All that we do and all that we are, should come from our love for Christ and for his people.