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*God, through His Son Jesus, provides eternal grace for our failures and human limitations.*

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## Acts 15.

(2013)

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The Bible not only reveals God's eternal plans purposes and promises

But also shows how you can know God for yourself.

***Teach it, don't demand it.***

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## Acts 15.

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### Topics.

- Paul and Barnabas go to Jerusalem to inquire about circumcision
- One of Paul's greatest battles.
- In Jerusalem the apostles and elders debate circumcision.
- God has visited the Gentiles to take from them a people for His name.
- The apostles and elders write a letter for the Gentiles at Antioch.
- For it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us.
- Paul, Barnabas, Judas and Silas return to Antioch with the letter.
- Paul and Barnabas have a sharp disagreement over John Mark.

### The Previous Chapter.

In the previous chapter Paul and Barnabas proclaimed the word of the Lord in the cities of Iconium, Lystra and Derbe and many believed, but Jews from these cities were jealous of the crowds Paul and Barnabas were drawing so they enticed the people to and stone Paul and Barnabas and drive them out of the city.

The chapter ended with Paul and Barnabas returning to each of these cities to support and encourage those who had believed and appoint elders in all the house churches that had been established in each city.

**NOTE:** for information concerning people, places and the meaning of words see Map Locations and People of the Bible, and Bible Dictionary on Website Menu.

### Paul and Barnabas go to Jerusalem to inquire about Circumcision.

Acts 15:1-5 ----- <sup>1</sup>But some men came down from Judea and were teaching the brothers, "Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved." <sup>2</sup>And after Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and debate with them, Paul and Barnabas and some of the others were appointed to go up to Jerusalem to the apostles and the elders about this question. <sup>3</sup>So, being sent on their way by the church, they passed through both Phoenicia and Samaria, describing in detail the conversion of the Gentiles, and brought great joy to all the brothers. <sup>4</sup>When they came to Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the church and the apostles and the elders, and they declared all that God had done with them. <sup>5</sup>But some believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees rose up and said, "It is necessary to circumcise them and to order them to keep the law of Moses."

### Circumcision was God's Covenant with Abraham and his Descendants.

God made a covenant with Abraham and his offspring saying: -

- Every male among you shall be circumcised and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and you. He who is eight days old among you shall be circumcised it shall be an everlasting covenant and any male who is not circumcised shall be cut off from Israel because he has broken my covenant (Gen 17:10-14) (Gen 17:23-27).

**NOTICE:** circumcision was a sign they were God's people and not a guarantee of salvation. We know this because Paul tells the Roman church that: -

- Faith was counted to Abraham as righteousness before he had been circumcised. Abraham received the sign of circumcision as a seal of the righteousness that he already had by faith while he was still uncircumcised so that God could make Abraham the

father of all who believe without being circumcised, so that righteousness would be counted to the uncircumcised as well, to the circumcised who also walk in the footsteps of the faith Abraham had before he was circumcised (Romans 4:9-12).

Nevertheless though circumcision was a sign of God's covenant with Israel many in the Jewish faith had turned it into the means of salvation i.e., as long as they were circumcised they were right with God, thus the reason for the lack of the fruits of the Spirit amongst many of the religious rulers of Jesus and Paul's generations.

### **One of Paul's Greatest Battles.**

Throughout Paul's ministry circumcision was a re-occurring problem amongst the Jewish brother who believed the word of the Lord. When Paul visited the Galatian church he saw that some Jewish brothers amongst them were causing them trouble because they were distorting the gospel of Christ and of grace and leading brothers and sisters in the Galatian church astray so much so that Paul in stunned amazement said: -

- I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting him who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel" (Gal 1:6-7).

The Jewish brothers were distorting the Gospel by teaching those in the Galatian church that they could not be saved simply by believing in Christ, but must also keep the laws of Judaism especially circumcision.

We know this because in chapter two Paul is telling the brothers and sisters in the Galatian church that even though Jewish brothers had secretly slipped in to their Paul and Titus's meetings to spy out the freedom they have in Christ Jesus and wanted to bring them back under the slavery of Moses customs and circumcision Titus (a Greek) was not circumcised.

Paul tells the Galatian congregation that neither he or Titus would not even yield for a moment in submission to the laws of Judaism so that the truth of the Gospel might be preserved for all who believe the word of the Lord and be fully convinced that no-one is justified by works of the law but only through faith in Jesus Christ, so whether Jewish or Gentile to be justified by faith everyone must believe in Christ Jesus and not in works of the law, because by works of the law no one will be justified. (Gal 2:3-16).

In chapter five Paul says to Galatian congregation: -

- If they accept circumcision, Christ will be of no advantage to them because everyone who accepts circumcision that they might be saved is obligated to keep the whole law (Gal 5:2-3)

**NOTE:** law in this context refers to the customs of Moses and the laws of Judaism.

When addressing the Colossians Paul states: -

- In Christ there is neither Greek or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free; but Christ is all, and in all (Col 3:11)

And to the Romans church Paul writes: -

- Since God is one. He will justify the circumcised by faith and the uncircumcised through faith. (Rom 3:30).

**Paul and Barnabas in Jerusalem:** certain Jewish men were teaching those (at Antioch) (v22) who believed the word of the Lord that it was impossible to be saved without being circumcised according to Moses Law. After Paul and Barnabas try to convince them otherwise (without success) they with some others go to Jerusalem to ask the apostles and the elders about this question. The church, the apostles and the elders at Jerusalem welcome them, but those of the Pharisees who had believed in the word of the Lord were adamant that they still had to keep the Law of Moses to be saved therefore they reasoned it was necessary to be circumcised even if a person believed in Christ.

## **In Jerusalem the Apostles and Elders debate Circumcision.**

Acts 15:6-12 ----- <sup>6</sup>The apostles and the elders were gathered together to consider this matter. <sup>7</sup>And after there had been much debate, Peter stood up and said to them, "Brothers, you know that in the early days God made a choice among you, that by my mouth the Gentiles should hear the word of the gospel and believe. <sup>8</sup>And God, who knows the heart, bore witness to them, by giving them the Holy Spirit just as he did to us <sup>9</sup>and he made no distinction between us and them having cleansed their hearts by faith. <sup>10</sup>Now, therefore, why are you putting God to the test by placing a yoke on the neck of the disciples that neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear? <sup>11</sup>But we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will." <sup>12</sup>And all the assembly fell silent, and they listened to Barnabas and Paul as they related what signs and wonders God had done through them among the Gentiles.

The apostles and the elders could not come to any solid conclusion concerning the question of circumcision, so Peter stand up and says, "God, who knows the heart, bore witness to the Gentiles by giving them the Holy Spirit just as he did to us making no distinction between the Jews and the Gentiles having cleansed their hearts by faith" (v8-9). Peter is referring to the miracle he had witnessed in the house of Cornelius where Jews and Gentiles were gathered together (Acts 10:44-48).

The Holy Spirit in this context refers to the gift of speaking in a language other than ones' own native language that others could clearly understand, and the words, "God gave them the Holy Spirit just as he did to us" (v8) Refer to the day of Pentecost when God poured out this same gift of the Holy Spirit on the one hundred and twenty gathered in the upper room (Acts 2:1-11).

Peter points out that though being Jewish he and the apostles believe they are saved in the same way as the Gentiles are; by the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ so why would they want to place the bondage of circumcision and by extension the customs of Moses ceremonial law on Gentile disciples in Christ when neither their Jewish fathers nor they have been able to maintain them? Peter's reasoning made so much sense no-one had any more to say, so they listened to Paul and Barnabas testimonies of the signs and wonders they had seen God do amongst the Gentiles.

**For further information on the gift of the Holy Spirit see: -**

- Act 2.
- Acts 10.

Both chapters are in, Commentary New Testament (ON WEBSITE MENU).

**God has visited the Gentiles to take from them a People for his Name.**

Acts 15:13-21 ----- <sup>13</sup>After they finished speaking, James replied, "Brothers, listen to me. <sup>14</sup>Simeon has related how God first visited the Gentiles, to take from them a people for his name. <sup>15</sup>And with this the words of the prophets agree, just as it is written, <sup>16</sup>"After this I will return, and I will rebuild the tent of David that has fallen; will rebuild its ruins, and I will restore it, <sup>17</sup>that the remnant of mankind may seek the Lord, and all the Gentiles who are called by my name, says the Lord, who makes these things <sup>18</sup>known from of old.' <sup>19</sup>Therefore my judgment is that we should not trouble those of the Gentiles who turn to God <sup>20</sup>but should write to them to abstain from the things polluted by idols, and from sexual immorality, and from what has been strangled, and from blood. <sup>21</sup>For from ancient generations Moses has had in every city those who proclaim him, for he is read every Sabbath in the synagogues."

After Barnabas and Paul had finished talking about the signs and wonders God had done amongst the Gentiles (v12) James says he recognises that, "God has visited the Gentiles to take from them a people for his name" (v14) and then adds strength to what Peter had said by citing the words of the prophet Amos who told

Israel, "God will rebuild and restore the tent of David that has fallen and its ruins so that the remnant of mankind may seek the Lord, and all the Gentiles who are called by His name" (Amos 9:11-12). James then advises the apostles and elders that they should not trouble Gentiles who turn to God through faith in the Lord Jesus Christ with circumcision or the customs of Moses except to give them a written letter advising them to abstain from things polluted by idols, from sexual immorality and from eating animals that have been strangled and from drinking their blood.

### **Pagan Faiths and Blood.**

During the apostles generations many pagan faiths used the blood of animals as a means of washing themselves spiritually clean. They would stand a bull on a steel grate four feet above the ground and the person to be cleansed would sit under it praying. A priest would slit the throat of the bull and the blood would flow over the person praying cleansing them of all sin (or so they believed) added to this horror it was common practise to drink the blood of an animal to receive the strength, life and power of that animal into themselves.

### **Moses is read in every Synagogue in every City every Sabbath.**

James statement, "From ancient generations Moses has had in every city those who proclaim him, for he is read every Sabbath in the synagogues" (v21) simply means that the Jews know the customs of Moses inside out because they have been read every Sabbath from the day the LORD gave birth to their nation, but to impose Moses laws on Gentiles who have never heard them would be placing them not only under extreme bondage but also totally unnecessary bondage.

### **The Apostles and Elders write a Letter for the Gentiles at Antioch.**

Acts 15:22-29 ----- <sup>22</sup>Then it seemed good to the apostles and the elders, with the whole church, to choose men from among them and send them to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas. They sent Judas called Barsabbas, and Silas, leading men among the brothers, <sup>23</sup>with the following letter: "The brothers, both the apostles and the elders, to the brothers who are of the Gentiles in Antioch and Syria and Cilicia, greetings. <sup>24</sup>Since we have heard that some persons have gone out from us and troubled you with words, unsettling your minds, although we gave them no instructions, <sup>25</sup>it has seemed good to us having come to one accord, to choose men and send them to you with our beloved Barnabas and Paul, <sup>26</sup>men who have risked their lives for the sake of our Lord Jesus Christ. <sup>27</sup>We have therefore sent Judas and Silas, who themselves will tell you the same things by word of mouth. <sup>28</sup>For it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to lay on you no greater burden than these requirements: <sup>29</sup>that you abstain from what has been sacrificed to idols, and from blood, and from what has been strangled, and from sexual immorality. If you keep yourselves from these, you will do well. Farewell."

The apostles, the elders with the whole church at Jerusalem were all in one accord with what James had spoken (v19-20) so they send Paul, Barnabas, Judas (called Barsabbas) and Silas to return to Antioch with a letter stating that all their brothers in the church at Jerusalem are in agreement that Gentiles in Christ need not concern themselves with circumcision or the customs of Moses, but to do well they should abstain from what has been sacrificed to idols, from drinking blood, from eating animals that have been strangled and from sexual immorality (v28-29).

### **For it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to Us.**

The words, "For it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us" (v28) means they all prayed and were all in one accord and all had a peace about the final decision they made i.e., there was no tension or strife amongst them. When brothers and sisters gather to solve a matter and they pray and openly discuss their concerns without entering into quarrels, arguments and strife and they all come to the same conclusion they can say, "It seemed good to us and good to the Holy Spirit."

This is because amongst many other things the Holy Spirit is a Spirit of humbleness, joy, contentment and peace, thus when things are discussed amongst brothers and sisters in Christ in a spirit of peace and humbleness with an honest desire to find the best answer for any given situation God is present.

### **Paul, Barnabas, Judas and Silas return to Antioch with the Letter.**

Acts 15:30-35 ----- <sup>30</sup>So when they were sent off, they went down to Antioch, and having gathered the congregation together, they delivered the letter. <sup>31</sup>And when they had read it, they rejoiced because of its encouragement. <sup>32</sup>And Judas and Silas, who were themselves prophets, encouraged and strengthened the brothers with many words. <sup>33</sup>And after they had spent some time they were sent off in peace by the brothers to those who had sent them <sup>34</sup>Notwithstanding it pleased Silas to abide there still. <sup>35</sup>But Paul and Barnabas remained in Antioch, teaching and preaching the word of the Lord, with many others also.

Paul, Barnabas, Judas (called Barsabbas) and Silas take the letter to Antioch, and when it was read to the congregation the people rejoiced because of its encouragement. Judas and Silas (both prophets) returned to Jerusalem (even though Silas wanted to stay) while Paul and Barnabas remained in Antioch teaching the word of the Lord.

### **Paul and Barnabas have a Sharp Disagreement over John Mark.**

Acts 15:36-41 ----- <sup>36</sup>And after some days Paul said to Barnabas, "Let us return and visit the brothers in every city where we proclaimed the word of the Lord, and see how they are." <sup>37</sup>Now Barnabas wanted to take with them John called Mark. <sup>38</sup>But Paul thought best not to take with them one who had withdrawn from them in Pamphylia and had not gone with them to the work. <sup>39</sup>And there arose a sharp disagreement, so that they separated from each other. Barnabas took Mark with him and sailed away to Cyprus, <sup>40</sup>but Paul chose Silas and departed, having been commended by the brothers to the grace of the Lord. <sup>41</sup>And he went through Syria and Cilicia, strengthening the churches.

Paul and Barnabas decide to return to every city in which they had proclaimed the word of the Lord and see how their brothers and sisters were doing. Barnabas wanted to take John Mark (his cousin) ((Col. 4:10).), but Paul was opposed to the idea and wanted to take Silas because John had left them in Pamphylia (Acts 13:13).

Why John left is not known some speculate that John left because he was fearful of persecution and the danger involved in doing the work of an apostle or was fatigue and weary by the constant travelling while other think John may have left to visit his mother at Jerusalem or Peter to who he was supposed to have been much attached or did not choose to go among the Gentiles.

Whatever the reason Paul thought John was not the best choice of the two men to go with them, on this present trip. Paul and Barnabas suffered massive persecution and stoning on their first journey through the cities they are returning to. It is quiet probable that Paul feared John Mark would not be able to withstand the persecution they may have to face. Regardless of the reason it should be noted that Paul tells the Colossian church to greet and welcome John Mark if he arrives (Col. 4:10).

### **NOTE.**

The Jews at Jerusalem who believed in Christ, but thought to be saved they had to be circumcised and keep the customs of Moses were adding works to their faith. It should be noted they weren't adding anything evil to their faith in Christ. For those who do not understand the depth of sin it is very easy to fall into this mindset.

Obviously Gentile Christians have no fear of adding circumcision and the customs of Moses to their faith, their danger comes more through religious deeds that are accepted today such as reading a certain amount of Scripture everyday, attending church and Bible meetings, praying or even doing good works.

All of these are good in themselves, but if anyone of them is being done to add to a person's salvation or maintain it their faith becomes like the Christian Jews at Jerusalem which Paul called a perverted faith and another Gospel because it becomes salvation by works and not faith and therefore nullifies everything Christ achieved on the cross.

The apostle Paul says it this way: -

- I do not nullify the grace of God, for if justification were through the law, then Christ died for no purpose” (Gal 2:21).

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End