

Acts of the Apostles
Luke, the beloved physician
Discussion Session 4
Chapters 13-15
Cultural Backgrounds Study Bible (pgs.)

Outline:

- I. Home missions (Acts 1-12)
 - The witness to the Jews in Jerusalem, Judea, and Samaria.
 - Outstanding leader—Peter.
 - Important city—Jerusalem.
- II. Foreign missions (acts 13-28)
 - The witness to the Gentiles, to the “uttermost *parts!*”
 - Outstanding leader—Paul.
 - Important cities—Antioch, Ephesus, and Rome.

Things to do:

1. Read all of the Book of Acts.
2. Answer the questions and fill out the outline. Use your own words. Do not quote unless the questions asks for that.
3. Be able to locate on the map, the places mentioned in Acts 1-12.
4. Draw Paul’s first and second journeys on the map, and Paul’s third and fourth on the maps provided.
5. Memorize Acts 1:8, 4:12, 16:31 (Optional)
6. Make a report on the life of at least one great missionary.

Opening Prayer

Heavenly Father, I pray that I may be quick to confess my own sin, eager to trust Your word and faithful to obey Your commands. and that I abide in You and You in me, so that I may be a 'man' after Your own heart - to Your praise and glory. This I ask in Jesus' name, AMEN

“And when he had removed him, he raised up unto them David to be their king; to whom also he gave testimony, and said, I have found David the son of Jesse, a man after mine own heart, which shall fulfil all my will.”
(Acts 13:22)

Foreign Missions—ACTS 13-28
Introduction to Paul's Life

Birth:

- A. Probably born about the same time as Jesus.
- B. In Tarsus, capital of the province of Cilicia, in Asia Minor.

Family:

- A. Jews from the tribe of Benjamin. (Saul may have been named for King Saul.)
- B. Roman citizenship—Paul was free born. This citizenship meant he could never be crucified or scourged and could appeal to Rome for justice.

Education:

- A. In Tarsus he would receive the benefits of Greek culture. Tarsus was a famous university town and commercial center.
- B. At Jerusalem under Gamaliel, he received the finest Jewish training and became an outstanding Pharisee.

Conversion:

- On the road to Damascus about 36 AD.

Trips:

- A. To Cyprus and Asia Minor.....First Journey
- B. To Europe.....Second Journey
- C. To Asia Minor and Europe (especially Ephesus)....Third Journey
- D. To Rome.....Fourth Journey

Writings:

- Thirteen or fourteen important New Testament Epistles

Imprisonments:

- A. Arrested and imprisoned in Jerusalem.
- B. Held as prisoner in Caesarea for two years.
- C. Taken to Rome where he remained in jail for two years.
- D. Temporarily released.
- E. In the Roman inner prison, he died a martyr under Nero.

Paul's First Missionary Journey and Resulting Church Conference
ACTS 13-15:35

Beneath the following names of places and subjects summarize what took place.

- A. Saul's Companions: Barnabas and John Mark.
- B. Send out from the church Barnabas and Saul (Paul)
- C. At Salamis on the Island of Cyprus They proclaimed word of God in the Jewish synagogues.
-
- D. Paphos on the Island of Cyprus (13:6-12) they met a Jewish sorcerer (false prophet). This false prophet was the attendant to the proconsul. This proconsul, an intelligent man, he wanted to hear the word of God. But the sorcerer opposed them and tried to turn the proconsul from faith. Saul said to this man: "You are a child of the devil, and an enemy of everything that is right!" Then he turned him blind.
- E. Perga in Asia Minor (13:13) They sailed from Perga to Pamphylia.
- F. Antioch in Asia Minor (13:14-50)
Paul preached Christ in the synagogue on the Sabbath. (13:14-41)
What else happened? They were invited to speak again on the next Sabbath, the following week and many of the people who were Jews and devout converts to Judaism followed Paul and Barnabas and urged them to keep preaching the Gospel.
-
- G. Iconium (13:51-14:5) The disciples were filled with joy and the Holy Spirit. They spoke effectively so that a great number of Jews and Greeks believed.
-
- H. Lystra (14:8-20) Paul healed a man who lame since birth, just by looking at him and knowing that he had the faith to be healed. Paul called

to him saying "Stand on your feet and be healed." He stood up and began to walk. _____

- I. Derbe (14:20-21) _____ They preached the gospel and won a large number of believers/disciples. _____
- J. Back to Lystra, Iconium, Antioch, Perga (14:21-25) _____ They went back and encouraged them to stay true to their faith. They said to them "We must go through many hardships. To enter the kingdom of God." Elders were appointed. _____
- K. Sailed from Attalia from Asian Minor back home to Antioch _____ in Syria (14:25-28).

CHURCH COUNCIL IN JERUSALEM ABOUT 50 AD (15:1-36)

Question discussed: Must one become a Jew before becoming a Christian?
(15:5-6)

_____ Peter _____ said God had sent the Holy Spirit to Gentiles. (15:7-11)
_____ Barnabas _____ and _____ Paul _____ spoke of wonders among the Gentiles. (15:2)

_____ James _____ thought the Gentiles should not be troubled by Jewish laws but should not offend the Jewish believers. They wrote _____ a letter _____ to the Gentiles stating this. (15:13-31)

Prayers of the people: Uncle David, Aunt Paulette, Aunt Anne, Aunt Doris Anne, Martha and her family, those with anxiety, suffering oppression, guidance for political leaders, military, police, anyone going through any hardships, or times of uncertainty.

Closing Prayer

Heavenly Father, how it must grieve You when there are sharp divisions and splits in the Body of Christ. I pray that I would walk all my days in spirit and truth, in unity with my brethren. Lord, give me boldness to call out ungodly behavior, and give me humility to accept criticism, when given in truth, in love, and to Your praise and glory. The enemy seeks to kill and destroy. I pray I will not give the enemy a foothold in my life, but as Paul states in Romans, "If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone." In Jesus' name, AMEN.

**“And the contention was so sharp between them, that they departed asunder one from the other: and so Barnabas took Mark, and sailed unto Cyprus;”
(Acts 15:39)**

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Chapter 13:1-14, 28

The Commissioning of Paul and Barnabas for Missionary Service.

In this chapter we see the scene and its setting of the great drama of Christianity is transferred from Jerusalem Antioch.

In the first part, which was hitherto been played by Peter and John and James, is now taken up by Barnabas and Saul, however, to be classes as Paul and Barnabas.

The church appears to have been well organized. Once again Barnabas, the man who lost the election for apostleship, became one of the main instruments of God in the advancement of the Gospel. Luke mentions five persons who were pillars of the church, exercising the ministry of prophets and teachers. These five were: Barnabas, Simeon called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen and Saul. But the person with the gift is not specified by the author.

We are now already familiar with two of the men. We are not completely sure why Simon is called “Niger,” and this remains unknown. There are a few explanations as to why this may be, but we do not have a complete understanding.

It is logical to assume that the command of the Holy Spirit to set apart Saul and Barnabas come in the form of a prophecy uttered by one of the men mentioned. The Holy Spirit had already spoken to Saul and Barnabas personal, as shown in the words: “The work to which I have called them. The prophecy, therefore, was a confirmation of the call the two had already received. The normal pattern of a call into ministry seems to be that the Holy Spirit speaks to an individual and confirms the call in the affirmation of the church. The additional tasing was the Lord’s leading. Having come to a sense of unanimity, they sent Paul and Barnabas on their way. Whether this meant that they two also received financial support is not mentioned, but it is very likely. We saw earlier that the church in Antioch demonstrated a spirit of generosity.

Read Acts 13-14

Acts 13:4-14:28

The First Missionary Journey

John Mark accompanied Saul and Barnabas on their first Missionary journey.

The Holy Spirit directed them to Salamis on the island of Cyprus. Barnabas was a native of Cyprus, which may have been the main reason for the team to begin their work in this place, although we do not have any details about their ministry at this place. Refugees from Jerusalem had already evangelized Cyprus when the first persecutions occurred.

The first incident that Luke describes is the audience with the proconsul of the island of Sergius Paphos, who resided at Paphos and who was most likely a gentile. The fact that this man sent for Paul and Barnabas to hear the Gospel is an indication that their ministry of the town was not unnoticed.

Paphos was notorious for her idolatry, witchcraft, and spiritual darkness. It is said that there is possibly no town as desolate as Paphos. Here Venus had a superb temple, here she was worshipped with all her rites, and from this place she was named the Paphian Venus, the queen of Paphos. This temple and the whole city were destroyed by an earthquake., so that a vestige of either is no longer in existence.

Bar-Jesus was a sorcerer, a false prophet., attached to the proconsul's court filled well in this atmosphere of demonic activity. When the proconsul showed interest in the Gospel, this man opposed him, using probably more than convincing words only. Elymus is not the Greek translation of the name Bar-Jesus but of the word "sorcerer." It is probably an Arabic word, meaning "Magician." Knowing this, we better understand Paul's sharp reaction to the opposition of this man. Paul opposed him with all the power of this prophetic office. Bar-Jesus must have used his power to put curses upon people. Such a

curse descended upon him now. Such a curse descended upon him now. The physical blindness, which Paul laid upon him., was merely an outward result of the spiritual condition of his heart. This punishment was temporal, which meant that this man was given the opportunity for conversion and redemption. The incident was also sufficient to sway the proconsul and bring him to the faith that would save his soul.

Some time after Sergius Paulus' conversion, the team left the island to set sail to Asia Minor, to Perga in Pamphylia. The first thing to observe in vs. 13 is the fact that Luke no longer describes the team as "Barnabas and Paul," but as "Paul and his companions." Most commentators deduct from this that, from that time on, Paul took the lead and Barnabas occupied the second place. Whether this was the case or not, we cannot say for sure. Luke has a subtle and euphemistic way to emphasize dramatic changes. No reason is given for the leaving of John Mark. The fact that this incident later sparked a conflict between Paul and Barnabas suggests that John Mark's reason for abandoning the apostles was less than laudable, but any explanation only amounts to speculation.

Verses 16-41 give us a sample of Paul's preaching to a Jewish congregation. The service was, evidently, also attended by some gentile converts to Judaism, as is obvious from the greeting: "Men of Israel and you Gentiles who worship God." Paul's motioning with his hands and the introductory words: "Listen to me!" suggest that the service was not conducted very orderly and in perfect silence, but that there was an atmosphere of cosines and sociable fellowship in which people kept on talking even during the preaching of the Word.

It seems that it was customary to begin a sermon with a short overview of Israel's history with and emphasis on the unfolding of God's revelation. That was also the approach Stephen took in his defense before the Sanhedrin. Some of the portions may have been prophecies about the rejection and suffering of the Servant of the Lord. Paul's remarks must have had relevance to his hearers. The most powerful argument was, of course, the resurrection from the dead. In order to prove that Jesus' resurrection was foretold, Paul quoted the Second Psalm. The Second Psalm is quoted twice in the Book of Acts. The apostles recognized the fulfillment of David's prophecy at the onset of the persecution and quoted the first two verses during their prayer meeting.²⁸⁶ Incidentally, this is the only place in the New Testament where the Old Testament quotation is backed up by a specific reference. Unfortunately, the NIV's rendering: "You are my Son; today I have become your Father" rather obscures

the point than clarifies it. The Greek verb *gennaō* means “to procreate,” or “to regenerate.”

Paul’s second quote is from Isaiah, chapter 55: “Give ear and come to me; hear me, that your soul may live. I will make an everlasting covenant with you, my faithful love promised to David.”²⁸⁸ This refers to God’s promise to David that one of his sons would occupy his throne throughout eternity.²⁸⁹

Paul’s third quote is from Psalm Sixteen: “because you will not abandon me to the grave, nor will you let your Holy One see decay.”²⁹⁰ Peter had used the same quotation in his discourse on the day of Pentecost. We don’t know if Paul was familiar with Peter’s sermon. At least he had come to the same logical conclusion that David’s words could not be construed to apply to himself, since he had died and his body had decomposed. It seems as if Paul jumps to conclusions when he says that the resurrection of Jesus opens the way of forgiveness of sin. We have to bear in mind that Luke gives a condensed version of a lengthy sermon. In referring to the ministry of John the Baptist, Paul may have quoted John’s famous exclamation: “Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!”²⁹¹ Or otherwise, those who knew about John must have been familiar with these words. The resurrection was proof of the fact that God, the Father, had accepted Jesus’ death on the cross as an atonement for the sins of the world.

Paul cut through to the core of the Gospel message, which is that the sacrifice of Christ provides a complete pardon for sin, a thing that the Law of Moses never promised. Peter even used a stronger language in preaching the Gospel to Cornelius and his company: “All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.”²⁹²

From a psychological point of view, Paul’s conclusion of his sermon does not seem to be the kind of altar call modern preachers would use. There is no gentile appeal to human emotions, but a harsh warning of doom for those who reject God’s offer. Maybe we have moved away too far from the Biblical approach to the preaching of the Gospel. Not too many preachers would dare to preach on topics such as “Sinners in the Hand of an Angry God,” as Jonathan Edwards did.

Paul's next quote is taken from Habakkuk; or rather it is an adaptation of Habakkuk's announcement of the coming judgment upon Israel in the form of the Babylonian invasion. We read: "Look at the nations and watch- and be utterly amazed. For I am going to do something in your days that you would not believe, even if you were told."]

Paul's message was initially well received. Luke reports that Paul and Barnabas were engaged in a great deal of counseling after the service, and they were invited to come back the next week and speak again. Evidently, word of Paul's sermon traveled throughout the city and the next Sabbath the synagogue was filled to capacity.

It is difficult to determine what went wrong at that point. Luke states: "When the Jews saw the crowds, they were filled with jealousy and talked abusively against what Paul was saying." Evidently, what happened was that a large number of people who were gentiles and who had not converted to Judaism had gathered and Paul offered to them the same salvation he had preached to the Jews and converts to Judaism the week before. It seems that the message had not been accepted unanimously the first time. There probably had been some heated discussions the previous Sabbath, which caused Paul to address the "scoffers." The controversy boiled down again to the point of circumcision. Had Paul instructed the non-Jews to become Jewish converts by submitting to circumcision before offering them salvation in Jesus Christ, there probably would have been no disagreement.

So the opposition to Paul's message seems to have started on the first Sabbath. The NIV states that the Jews "talked abusively against what Paul was saying." The Greek word used is *blasphemeo*, which means, as we can guess, "to blaspheme." This seems to imply that the opponents rejected the notion that Jesus Christ was the expected Messiah.

Paul and Barnabas were not in the least intimidated by the strong opposition to their message. Their boldness stemmed from their spiritual authority as ambassadors of the Lord and the power of the Holy Spirit. Paul's eloquence grew richer in that he answered the opponents with, what may be considered, a touch of irony: "Since you reject it and do not consider yourselves worthy of eternal life, we now turn to the Gentiles." These Jews did, of course, not consider themselves "unworthy" of anything. They deemed themselves too good for such a cheap Gospel. Corrie ten Boom tells the story of her return to

Germany after WWII to preach the Gospel to the people who had been guards in the Nazi concentration camps. These men and women, who were guilty of inhuman cruelties, considered themselves above the simple message Miss ten Boom brought. They stated that they were used to more sophisticated theology and more profound truth. Corrie says that the Lord told her to bring them some chocolate, which at that time was still a rare commodity. The people took the chocolate and ate it eagerly. Corrie told them that their attitude toward chocolate was healthier than toward the Gospel; they ate it without considering themselves too good for candy and without asking profound questions.

Actually, only those who consider themselves unworthy are those who are candidates for salvation. Only those who say to God: “Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son”²⁹⁷ are worthy of the Father’s embrace.

The rule for Paul’s preaching had been clearly outlined by Jesus Himself. He had said to His disciples that: “repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem.”²⁹⁸ Paul adhered closely to this principle and explaining the content of the Gospel in his Epistle to the Romans, he wrote that it “is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile.”²⁹⁹ A lack of conviction of sin, which was the attitude exhibited by the Jews who opposed Paul’s preaching, also blinds the eyes for the meaning of the Word of God. Paul’s parting quote in answer to the opposition outlines God’s eternal plan for His creation. Paul left them with a verse from Isaiah, the prophet they said to esteem so highly and whom they considered so little: “It is too small a thing for you to be my servant to restore the tribes of Jacob and bring back those of Israel I have kept. I will also make you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring my salvation to the ends of the earth.”³⁰⁰

In God’s plan of salvation of this world, Israel as a nation was meant to be “a kingdom of priests,” a truth which they had never fully understood. At the foot of Mount Sinai, God had said: “Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.”³⁰¹ God’s chosen people never understood the purpose for which God had chosen them; they merely boasted in the fact that they were chosen.

In shaking off the dust of their feet, they literally obeyed Jesus' command, who had told His disciples: "If people do not welcome you, shake the dust off your feet when you leave their town, as a testimony against them."³⁰²

This ritual had a deep symbolic meaning; it established the relationship of the people to the land. The very soil of a country was considered to be blessed when the people lived in fellowship with God. On the other hand, the Scriptures state that the land would vomit out the people who desecrated that land by their sin. God had told His people: "If you defile the land, it will vomit you out as it vomited out the nations that were before you."³⁰³ Although the Lord's messengers went through a traumatic experience, they left behind a group of young believers who were filled with joy and with the Holy Spirit.

Paul visited Iconium also on his second missionary journey and, some scholars believe a third time. The first visit initially met with an overwhelming response to the message preached. The team adhered to the principle of bringing the Gospel first to those who attended the synagogue, which in this case also meant preaching to both Jews and Jewish converts. Although many responded positively, a stiff resistance was mounted against the team, which was initiated by the Jews who rejected the message, but which seems to have strongly influenced the Greek population of the city. The ministry of Paul and Barnabas divided the city into two camps. We do not read how the Jews poisoned the mind of the gentiles, but they probably suggested that accepting the Gospel of Jesus Christ would be the collapse of their idol worship and, consequently, of their culture. The resisting Jews could hardly have influenced the gentiles by stating that the Gospel would mean the end of Judaism as they practiced it; that would have had no effect upon a pagan population. Although none of this is stated in detail, we can deduct that the Jews did not shy from using arguments that actually promoted heathenism in order to defeat the preaching of the Gospel. That made them doubly guilty in that they betrayed their own religion at the same time. This is what Paul referred to in his letter to the Thessalonians, where we read: "They displease God and are hostile to all men in their effort to keep us from speaking to the Gentiles so that they may be saved. In this way they always heap up their sins to the limit."³⁰⁴

In spite of the enormous tensions their preaching generated in the city, Paul and Barnabas spent considerable time there, and the Holy Spirit allowed them to perform miracles, probably, consisting of supernatural healings.

It wasn't until a plot to assassinate the brethren was discovered that they left and went to Lystra and Derbe. They probably suffered some physical abuse before they fled, because Paul later mentioned Iconium in his letter to Timothy as one of the cities in which he suffered persecution. We read: "You, however, know all about my teaching, my way of life, my purpose, faith, patience, love, endurance, persecutions, sufferings-what kinds of things happened to me in Antioch, Iconium and Lystra, the persecutions I endured."³⁰⁵ The audience in Lystra must have been a mixed one also, as we can deduct from the reaction to a miracle of healing Paul performed.

A man who attended the service was a paraplegic from birth. The fact that he demonstrated "faith to be healed" suggests, first of all, that Paul may have elaborated in his sermon on the implications for the human body of Christ's resurrection. It also emphasizes that the faith of the sick person plays an important role in his healing. It is an undeniable fact that the healing of the body has a psychological side. The Book of Proverbs concurs with this, saying: "A cheerful heart is good medicine, but a crushed spirit dries up the bones."³⁰⁶ The healing of Aeneas in Lydda in which Peter had been instrumental seems to emphasize the faith of Peter, rather than of the sick person,³⁰⁷ which intimates that there are no fixed rules.

The healing of the paralyzed man in Lystra had an undesirable effect upon the preaching of the Gospel team. The gentiles of the city drew the conclusion from this instantaneous healing, that their gods, Zeus and Hermes, had come to them in human form. Our text does not specify that Paul invoked the name of Jesus in commanding this man to be healed. Some manuscripts, however, insert the words: "I say unto you, in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, 'stand upright on thy feet.'" It is quite likely that Paul pronounced such words, and that the implication of the invocation of the Name of Jesus was somehow lost on the audience.

Since the following commotion was carried on in a language which Paul and Barnabas did not know, they could, initially, not understand what the crowd intended to do with them. There is proof that there existed a local language in the region of Lystra and Derbe but no one knows what it was. Evidently, the majority of the population was, at least, bilingual.

The crowd's conclusion that Zeus and Hermes, otherwise called Jupiter and Mercury in Latin, had come down to visit the city may have been based on a known mythological legend.

We learn from this incident that Paul was the main speaker during these evangelistic campaigns and that Barnabas kept himself more in the background. Chrysostom conjectured from the people's reaction in Lystra that Barnabas was a large, athletic man, which was the reason he was taken for Jupiter; and that Paul was small in his person, and was, therefore, supposed to be Mercury. We should not accept this as Gospel truth and it is of little importance for the understanding of this portion.

Luke informs us that there was a temple of Zeus outside the city and that there was a priest who was specifically dedicated to this deity. So the crowd prepared a ceremony with sacrifices to honor Barnabas and Paul. Someone must have translated for Paul and Barnabas, or in answer to their questions, told them in Greek what was happening. The two reacted rather violently to the information; they tore their clothes and rushed into the crowd. We suppose that it was Paul who shouted the eloquent sermon about who they were and who the God was whom they represented. The effect of this extemporaneous preaching was, evidently, less than of the sermons preached in the synagogue, because the crowd could barely be contained in their efforts to bring the sacrifices. The sight of these two men, with torn clothes, wildly gesticulating in a crowd whose passion had reached a peak, must have been quite a reversal of the concept of two gods coming to earth in human form. One wonders if the apostles, if we may use this title for Barnabas also, felt any temptation to yield to the worship that they were about to receive. Satan, undoubtedly, must have tried to batter their minds with illusions for glory, and power, and with the promise that all resistance against them would cease if they accepted this tribute. Their feeling of horror and repulsion, expressed in the tearing of the clothes, is evidence of the fact that the Holy Spirit was powerfully upon them.

When "the gods" refused the honor, the crowd turned against them. The episode coincided with the arrival of some Jews from Antioch and Iconium, from where Paul and Barnabas had fled for their lives. Finding a crowd in a volatile mood, they had no trouble turning the worship into an execution. Paul was dragged out of town and stoned to death, or so they thought. Luke does not explain how Barnabas escaped. If it is true that the people mistook him

for Zeus because of his physical appearance, he may have commanded enough respect to be kept from being manhandled. It may also be that Barnabas, being the milder in character of the two, had been less controversial in the way he ministered the Gospel. The impression we get from Paul as he appears to us, both in Acts and in his epistles, is that he was an impulsive person who stated his convictions in a strong way and did not shy from conflict. Whether Paul was clinically dead, or merely near death is impossible to ascertain. Luke's choice of words: "Thinking he was dead," suggests that Paul may have been in a coma, but that he had not actually died. Paul refers to this incident in his letter to the Corinthians where he catalogues his suffering for the cause of the Gospel: "Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned, three times I was shipwrecked, I spent a night and a day in the open sea."³⁰⁸ This may also have been the moment of which he speaks in the same epistle: "I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven. Whether it was in the body or out of the body I do not know-God knows. And I know that this man-whether in the body or apart from the body I do not know, but God knows- was caught up to paradise. He heard inexpressible things; things that man is not permitted to tell."³⁰⁹

The amount of time that was spent in Derby, was not specified in this section, but we know that they won a large number of disciples. Which tells us that there wasn't little to no opposition in that city. We must however, notice that Barnabas and Paul fled from Iconium to save their own lives, because they people there had planned to kill them. This indicates that they had a change of heart and their attitudes had changed.

Paul later refers to this experience in the Second Epistles to the Corinthians where he says: "We do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about the hardship we suffered in the province of Asia. He told them that they were under great pressure, that they felt the sentence of death. They relied on God, who raises the dead, and he delivered us from such a deadly peril. It is true however, not many of us would want to follow in these shoes and go through the things that they went through. Fear of death has a great effect on most people, but Jesus said to his disciples: "Do not be afraid of this who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, be afraid of the One who can destroy both the body and the soul in hell. Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from the will of the Father. An even the very hairs of your head are all numbered. So don't be afraid; you are

worth more than many sparrows.” Yet many have paid for their lives for their preaching of the Gospel. God does not expect us to be heroes, but He wants us to be obedient servants.

Paul and Barnabas used these words to the disciples to sum up their mission: “We must go through many hardships.” These words fully sum up the book of Acts. These words do not mean that suffering buys us entrance into the kingdom. The kingdom is ours through repentance and rebirth, Jesus tells us: “Don’t be afraid, little flock, for your Father has been pleased to give you the kingdom.” But we need to realize that it is not for nothing, because Jesus also says that: “Small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life.” We must remember that God did not make the gate small and the road narrow: He gives us the kingdom. The reason that we cannot make it through the gate on our own is due to the swelling in our lives that is caused by sin, which prevents us from fitting into the gate. When God’s holiness reduces size, we will have no trouble entering and advancing.

When we speak of hardship, we find words such as “strengthening,” and “encouraging” out of place. It is possible that we find the words such as “warning,” or “sign” may be more suitable. However, James penetrates to the core of the problems with the words: “Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, and not lacking anything.

Observe the practical approach of the Gospel team in their efforts to edify the young churches they had planted: They “appointed elders for them in each church and, with prayer and fasting, committed them to the Lord, in whom they had put their trust.” The churches were organized into well-functioning bodies of believers. The words “the Lord, in whom they had put their trust” refer to the faith of Paul and Barnabas. When they set out on this missionary journey, they believed that God would confirm their efforts and use their ministry to save souls. Their faith had been richly rewarded.

They retraced their steps back to Attalia where they boarded a ship and sailed to Antioch, which had become their home church and the base of their mission. We don’t know how long the whole journey had taken; it had most

likely covered several years. Traveling by sea and overland at that time was a time-consuming endeavor. Planting a church is never done overnight; it must have taken weeks and months for them to establish a fellowship of believers. As we saw, Luke mentions that they spent considerable time in Iconium, and we cannot imagine that, on their return, they hurried along while strengthening and encouraging the new believers. But when they left for Antioch they considered that their work was finished.

The first missionary convention in church history must have been a joyous occasion. Paul and Barnabas, evidently, reported their adventures in great detail; so much so that Luke, who entered the picture years later, was able to give us such a detailed report as we find in these last two chapters of his book.

Read Acts 15

Acts 15:1-35

Problem of the Gentil church, and council in Jerusalem

The heading “Problem of the Gentile church” may be better stated as “Problem of the church.” It was the church, not just the gentile section that must come to terms with the question as to whether only Jews would be saved, and that one must first become a Jew by submitting to the rite of circumcision, which would comprise observing all of the ceremonial part of the Law of Moses. The problem, therefore, went well beyond the rite of circumcision; it involved the whole complex of observance of ceremony or spiritual renewal, of work versus grace.

We could wonder why God did not intervene by direct revelation so that no misunderstanding about the application of the Old Testament rite could be possible. Why did He leave it up to finite men to figure out the applications and the consequences? The Book of Proverbs suggests that God’s silence is proof of our regal position in His kingdom. We read: It is the glory of God to conceal a matter; to search out a matter is the glory of kings.”³¹⁶

We cannot overstate the importance of the issue raised in this chapter. The matter of “works” versus “grace” has plagued the church from its very beginning and it is still a pressing issue at present. Satan has used the

subject over the centuries to keep people out of the kingdom. We should note the slyness of his approach. The Law of Moses is an expression of the will and character of God, but the enemy has managed to use the matter of keeping the law to estrange people from God's grace.

It is not possible to enter too deeply into the problem in the context of our study of Acts. We must state, however, that one of the problems is the fact that often no distinction is made between the moral section of the law and the ceremonial one. None of the demands of the Ten Commandments, for instance, are abolished in the transition from the Old Testament to the New. As a matter of fact, with the exception of the Sabbath command, all of the commandments are repeated in the New Testament. The fundamental difference between the Old Testament and the New is the difference of sacrifice. The very fact that there was a ceremonial law, which made provision for the atonement of sins committed, implies that man would not be able to fulfill the moral demands of the law. The change in sacrifice, the difference between atonement by the blood of sacrificial animals and by the blood of Christ has brought about a fundamental change in the heart of man. The death of Christ in our behalf has opened the way for the coming of the Holy Spirit and the subsequent renewal of our inner man. Paul expresses this most powerfully in his Epistle to the Romans: "For what the law was powerless to do in that it was weakened by the sinful nature, God did by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful man to be a sin offering. And so he condemned sin in sinful man, in order that the righteous requirements of the law might be fully met in us, who do not live according to the sinful nature but according to the Spirit."³¹⁷ The people who preached circumcision completely failed to understand the radical change produced by the death of Jesus Christ and the implication of the new form of atonement. God did reveal the meaning of it to some of His servants. This is what Paul meant in his Epistle to the Galatians when he said: "I want you to know, brothers, that the gospel I preached is not something that man made up. I did not receive it from any man, nor was I taught it; rather, I received it by revelation from Jesus Christ."³¹⁸

As said above, the issue was not circumcision or uncircumcision but whether a person is saved by what he does for God or by what God does for him. Paul states his position clearly in his Epistle to the Corinthians: "This is the rule I lay down in all the churches. Was a man already circumcised when he was called? He should not become uncircumcised. Was a man uncircumcised when he was called? He should not be circumcised. Circumcision is

nothing and uncircumcision is nothing. Keeping God's commands is what counts."319

Why the matter first came to a head in the church of Antioch rather than in the church of Jerusalem is one of the unsolved mysteries of the Bible. It may be that the church in Jerusalem, being at the place where the temple was located, still participated in the temple rituals without asking questions about it. It had been taken for granted that gentiles who came to Jerusalem to worship God would submit to the rite of circumcision. The presence of Paul, to whom Jesus had given His special revelation regarding the meaning of grace, accounts for the resistance in the church of Antioch. Paul was, beyond doubt, the first theologian in the history of the church; maybe he is the only one.

Rather than risking a split in the church over the issue, the elders of the church decided to send a delegation to Jerusalem and ask that the apostles issue a declaration on the point. Thus occurred the first church council in history.

In traveling from Antioch to Jerusalem, Paul and Barnabas followed the Roman road that led along the coast of Palestine. This accomplished a double purpose: it made traveling easier and it allowed them to visit the existing churches on the way. They used the occasion to report the result of their missionary journey. Luke states: "They told how the Gentiles had been converted." The Pulpit Commentary observes: "There was an especial reason for doing so, as it had a strong bearing upon the great controversy about to be decided at Jerusalem." If, in fact, their reporting took on the form of campaigning "their cause," they must have been less than naïf in the pursuit of their goal in traveling to Jerusalem.

This is the first instance in which the fact is mentioned that there were churches in Phoenicia. The reaction to their report is great gladness. The fact that gentiles had responded so overwhelmingly to the Gospel was accepted as a very positive factor. Evidently, these churches understood the command to take the Gospel to the ends of the earth.

Upon arrival in Jerusalem, the delegates give the same report as they had given to the church along the Roman road. They met with the apostles and the elders of the church. It is generally supposed that this was the occasion Paul speaks of

in his Epistle to the Galatians, where he states: “James, Peter and John, those reputed to be pillars, gave me and Barnabas the right hand of fellowship when they recognized the grace given to me.”³²⁰

The reaction of the church as a whole was not as unanimously positive as it had been in the churches along the way. There was an immediate reaction from the side of the believers from among the Pharisees. It seems that, even before Paul and Barnabas had a chance to present the matter for which the church in Antioch had delegated them to Jerusalem, the opposition voiced its objections to the report of the conversion of the gentiles.

It is difficult to prove from Scripture that gentiles who accept the Gospel and become followers of Jesus Christ must submit to the rite of circumcision. The first instance in which circumcision is mentioned in the Bible is at the ratification of God’s covenant with Abraham. We read that God said to Abraham: “This is my covenant with you and your descendants after you, the covenant you are to keep: Every male among you shall be circumcised. You are to undergo circumcision, and it will be the sign of the covenant between me and you. For the generations to come every male among you who is eight days old must be circumcised, including those born in your household or bought with money from a foreigner--those who are not your offspring. Whether born in your household or bought with your money, they must be circumcised. My covenant in your flesh is to be an everlasting covenant. Any uncircumcised male, who has not been circumcised in the flesh, will be cut off from his people; he has broken my covenant.”³²¹ From that time on, circumcision was regarded as a sign of a man’s belonging to the family of Abraham, particularly through the line of Isaac and Jacob. The Mosaic Law only mentions in passing the necessity of circumcision for a male child. In the context of the purification rites for a woman who gives birth to a male child, we read: “On the eighth day the boy is to be circumcised.”³²²

The above pertains exclusively to people descending in direct lineage from Abraham, via Jacob. The only mention of the need for circumcision for people from another race is in connection with the celebration of the Passover. “An alien living among you who wants to celebrate the LORD’s Passover must have all the males in his household circumcised; then he may take part like one born in the land. No uncircumcised male may eat of it.”³²³

The Passover was the commemoration of Israel's exodus from Egypt, which made them from a group of slaves into a free people. The only reason why a non-Israelite would want to participate in this celebration would be if he understood the spiritual significance of the exodus. If we understand that Jesus Christ is the real Passover Lamb who saves us from death and damnation, we have passed from the shadow into the reality. And if we pass from one shadow, we may as well pass from all the shadows that represent the sacrifice of Christ in the Mosaic Law. In that case, circumcision, and practice of the rituals of the law have become redundant.

Among the Christians in Antioch were some from Jerusalem teaching that a believer had to be circumcised and obey the law of Moses to be saved (15:1). Paul and Barnabas, at Antioch at that time, opposed their teaching vehemently. The church in Antioch sent Paul and Barnabas to Jerusalem to seek the advice of the apostles and elders there (v. 2-4).

The early church was careful and thought of the central issues at work in the development of the early church (v. 5-20). They did not tolerate unauthorized preaching, as had originally stirred up the problem in Antioch, and they discussed the questions openly. They based their decision on the Scriptures, the teaching of Jesus, and the work of the Holy Spirit.

Closing Prayer

Heavenly Father, how it must grieve You when there are sharp divisions and splits in the Body of Christ. I pray that I would walk all my days in spirit and truth, in unity with my brethren. Lord, give me boldness to call out ungodly behaviour, and give me humility to accept criticism, when given in truth, in love, and to Your praise and glory. The enemy seeks to kill and destroy. I pray I will not give the enemy a foothold in my life, but as Paul states in Romans, "If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone." In Jesus' name, AMEN.

"And the contention was so sharp between them, that they departed asunder one from the other: and so Barnabas took Mark, and sailed unto Cyprus;" (Acts 15:39)