

Acts 15:22-35 ~ Teacher's Lesson The Jerusalem Council, Part B

Introduction: Paul's first missionary (Acts 13-14) journey confirmed that God was calling Gentiles to be His people. The success of the mission to the Gentiles set the stage for Acts 15—the Jerusalem Council. The Jerusalem Council dealt the question of a Gentile believers' relationship to the Law of Moses (whether or not Gentiles had to pass through the gates of Judaism to come to Jesus). The issue here is the New Testament Christian's relationship to the requirements of the Old Testament.

Even after 2,000 years, there are still people who are confused about this. You will still meet prosperity preachers who offer their listeners the material blessings of the Law of Moses, people who feel obligated to keep a Sabbath day (the sign of the Sinai covenant), those who think that keeping the Mosaic dietary law (abstaining from pork, shrimp, oysters, lobster) is necessary for sanctification, sincere believers who think they should tithe because things said by Malachi, and Dispensationalists who are convinced that the promised land still rightly belongs to Israel and that unbelieving Jews are still God's people.

Today we will focus of the "so what" of the Jerusalem Council. The sermons of the Puritan preachers had the text, the doctrine derived from the text, and finally "the use" (the application). Today we will apply the Jerusalem Council to our lives.

Long Review (15:1-21):

1. So Said The False Teachers:

****1. **What controversial teachings caused the Antioch church to consult the apostles (15:1, 5)?** Men from Judea traveled to Antioch teaching that it was necessary to be circumcised in order to be saved, 15:1. This is a false gospel. Back in Jerusalem, some genuine "believers" said it was necessary to keep the Law of Moses, 15:5 (evidently for righteousness sake).

2. What does the Old Testament teach about circumcision that would lead someone to believe it was necessary for salvation (15:1)? See *Genesis 17:14*. Circumcision was the sign of God's covenant with Abraham. Anyone refusing circumcision was to be cut off from among the people (either executed or deported), and was clearly not part of the Abrahamic covenant.

ESV **Genesis 17:14** Any uncircumcised male who is not circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin shall be cut off from his people; he has broken my covenant.

****3. **Based on 15:2, how did Paul and Barnabas feel about this teaching on circumcision (15:1)?** See *Galatians 5:2, 6*. They clearly disagreed. The words Luke used were "dissent" and "debate".

Galatians: Paul likely wrote Galatians after he got back to Antioch from the first missionary journey in Galatia, but before the Jerusalem Council met. The problems dealt with in Galatians shows that he was well familiar with—and opposed to—the teaching that circumcision was needed for salvation or that Christians should keep the Law of Moses:

ESV **Galatians 5:2** . . . if you accept circumcision, Christ will be of no advantage to you.

ESV **Galatians 5:6** . . . in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything, but only faith working through love.

2. So Said Peter:

****4. **Why did Peter think it ridiculous for Gentiles to be circumcised and ordered to obey the Law of Moses (15:7-11)?** See *Ephesians 2:14-16*. Peter said God had already poured out the Holy Spirit on both the Jew and the Gentiles (accepting them as they were, 15:8) and that anyway salvation came to both Jew and Gentile by grace through faith (not circumcision, 15:9, 11).

No Distinction: Peter said that this (15:8-9) proves that God now makes “no distinction” between Jew and Gentile. Related to the topic of there being no distinction, Paul wrote:

ESV **Ephesians 2:14-16** . . . [Christ] is our peace, who has made us both [Jew & Gentile] one and has broken down . . . the dividing wall of hostility by abolishing the law of commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace, and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility.

Joke: Combining believing Jews with believing Gentiles creates on new spiritual man: Jewtiles! (Or Jews with Greeks: Jeeks!).

5. According to Romans 3:19-25, 7:7-11, what important spiritual service did the Law do for the Jews? God’s spiritual purpose for the Law was to show the elect Jews their sinfulness and their need for righteousness apart from the Law.

ESV **Romans 3:19-20** . . . whatever the law says it speaks to those who are under the law [Jews] . . . through the law comes knowledge of sin.

Here is Paul’s testimony of the Law’s ministry in his life as a elect Jew:

ESV **Romans 7:7-11** . . . if it had not been for the law, I would not have known sin. I would not have known what it is to covet if the law had not said, "You shall not covet." But sin, seizing an opportunity through the commandment, produced in me all kinds of covetousness. Apart from the law, sin lies dead. I was once alive apart from the law, but when the commandment came, sin came alive and I died. The very commandment that promised life proved to be death to me. For sin, seizing an opportunity through the commandment . . . killed me.

3. James Said:

****6. The prophet Amos predicted that God would rebuild the fallen tent of David.

According to James, how was this fulfilled (15:14-17)? The fallen tent of David was rebuilt in Jesus and extended to include Gentiles.¹

New Covenant Theology: We must allow the New Testament to interpret the Old. According to James, the church is the fulfillment of the prediction that David's tent would be rebuilt and restored. Jesus, of course, was a direct descendant of David. Jesus' death on the cross cancelled the Old Covenant and removed the distinction between Jew and Gentile. It has nothing to do with modern geo-political Israel. It has to do with the church, which is the true Israel. This is not replacement theology, it is fulfillment theology.

Caterpillars & Butterflies: God's eternal purpose has always been to ready a bride for His Son. The nation of ancient Israel existed to help make this possible. The relationship between the Old Testament and the New Testament is like the relationship between a caterpillar and the butterfly that it turns into—same insect, but totally transformed. The early stage of development was necessary for the later stage of fulfillment. Furthermore, there is no going back. Butterflies never revert back into caterpillars. So, God's purpose has never changed, but its fulfillment involved a process of transformation from ancient Israel (the caterpillar) to the new covenant church (the butterfly).

****What was the judgment of James about this (15:12-21)? Like Peter, James agreed that the Gentiles should not be troubled with circumcision and obeying the Law of Moses (15:19).²

Exception: What few things from Moses did James want the Gentiles to abstain from (15:20)? There were 600 laws given by Moses; James asked the Gentiles to keep only 4 of them (3 of the 4 concerned food): **1)** things polluted by idols (meat sacrificed to idols), **2)** sexual immorality, **3)** eating strangled animals and **4)** eating blood (three of these things concerned food). Note that 3 of the 4 had to do with diet.

7. Based on 15:21, what was James' reasoning behind avoiding these few things (15:20)? See *Romans 14:20, 1 Corinthians 9:20 & 10:23-33*. It had to do with evangelism. The Jerusalem Council made it clear that the Gentiles are not under the Law of Moses. Abstaining had to do with not offending the unbelieving Jews. James suggested that the Gentiles of his generation follow a few basic Jewish dietary restrictions so as not to offend the Jews scattered throughout the Roman Empire. Paul also took this approach:

ESV 1 Corinthians 10:32-33 Give no offense to Jews or to Greeks . . . that they may be saved.

¹ James' quote from Amos follows the Septuagint rather than the Hebrew Masoretic text (Marshall, 267). The Masoretic text may have been altered by apostate Judaism after Jesus came to lessen prophetic references to Him.

² James seems to have changed his mind since the problem Paul dealt with in Galatians 2.

8. Are Gentile Christians today still obligated to avoid meat sacrificed to idols, things strangled, and blood (15:19-21)? Perhaps if we lived in modern Israel, yes. However, the particulars of James' list (15:20) were relevant only to the discussion at hand back then. The church at that point was predominately Jewish, and of course everyone hoped to see more Jews converted out of the synagogues. In that context, James' request made sense. That is not the case today. Times really have changed. However, the overall principle is timeless: we should not offend people.

How should we apply James' ideas on abstaining from sexual immorality (15:20)? "Sexual Immorality" (15:20) is to be avoided whether one is concerned about offending the Jews or not (15:21). James may have mentioned abstaining from sexual immorality because the Gentiles did not hold high standards of sexual purity. Though we are not under the Law of Moses, we are under the Law of Christ, which clearly forbids sexual immorality.

4. So Said the Jerusalem Council (New Material)

******What decision was reached by the Jerusalem Council (15:22-35)?** The apostles and elders agreed with what Peter and James had said, adding that the men who went to Antioch teaching circumcision were not authorized to do so.³

9. Why were people chosen to accompany Paul and Barnabas with the letter (15:22)? See 15:27. It was probably for the sake of authentication, which suggests they expected opposition from the false teachers in Antioch. They were taking no chances. It was a show of force.

10. Based on 15:24, what could be said about any teaching that believers should obey the Law of Moses? Such a teaching is **1)** troubling, **2)** unsettling, and **3)** not based on the instruction of the apostles. In 15, 28 even the four things to abstain from were described as a "burden".

How did they describe the agreement within the council in 15:25? It states that they had come to "one accord".⁴ The false teachers were clearly in the minority.

11. How did the Antioch church respond to the Jerusalem letter (15:30-35)? They found it encouraging, 15:31! Free from the Law, a happy condition! Their reaction to the letter shows they held the same view of circumcision that Paul and Barnabas had.

³ The very nature of the Gospel had been called into question. If ever there were a proper time and place for the Apostles to make a decision alone, apart from the church, it was at the Jerusalem Council. Yet even here, the Apostles not only included the local Jerusalem elders, but also the whole church (15:22)!

⁴ In general, major church decisions should be based on overall consensus, not majority rule.

What did Judas, Silas, Paul, and Barnabas do after they delivered the letter (15:30-35)? Judas and Silas encouraged and strengthened the church with many prophetic words,⁵ and Paul and Barnabas taught and preached the word.⁶ This is in contrast to false teachers from Judea, whose teaching was discredited.

So What?

12. What impact did the new covenant have on the Law of Moses and the Mosaic covenant, according to Hebrews 8:8-13? *See also Hebrews 7:12.* It rendered it obsolete.

ESV **Hebrews 8:13** In speaking of a new covenant, he makes the first one obsolete. And what is becoming obsolete and growing old is ready to vanish away.

God's people transitioned from the Levitical priesthood under Moses to the Melchizedek priesthood under Jesus. Look what this meant for the Law:

ESV **Hebrews 7:12** . . . when there is a change in the priesthood, there is necessarily a change in the law as well.

Lawlessness: Lawlessness is a sin:

ESV **1 John 3:4** . . . sin is lawlessness.

There has been a change from the old covenant to the new, and a change from the Law of Moses to the Law of Christ. Christians are under the Law of Christ. To be His disciple means to obey all that Jesus commanded (much more than the things mentioned by James).

13. In 1 Corinthians 9:20-21, how did Paul describe the unbelieving Jew's relationship to the Law? The unbelieving Gentile's relationship to the Law? His own relationship to Law? Paul described the unbelieving Jews as those "under the law" (*hupo numos*, 9:20), though Paul himself was "not under the law" (9:20). Paul then described the unbelieving Gentiles as those "not having the law" (*anomos*, 9:21). Significantly, Paul next referred to himself as "under Christ's law" (*ennomous christou*, 9:21). Thus, the believer is neither "under the law" nor "without the law," but rather is "in-lawed to Christ"! We are bound by the law of Christ, not the law of Moses. NCT is not antinomian!

ESV **1 Corinthians 9:20-21** To those under the law [Jews] I became as one under the law (though not being myself under the law) that I might win those under the law. To those outside the law [Gentiles] I became as one outside the law (not being outside the law of God but under the law of Christ) that I might win those outside the law.

⁵ Prophecy is not merely telling the future. The gift can also manifest itself in encouragement and strengthening through many words. See 1 Corinthians 14:3, 31.

⁶ "Teaching" is from *didasko* ("didactic") but "preaching" is from *euaggelizo* ("evangelize").

14. The English versions of our Old Testament declare circumcision to be the eternal sign of an eternal covenant (Abrahamic, Ge 17:7, 12-13). However, the New Testament writers declared that circumcision does not count for anything (Ga 5:6ff). How can the New Testament writers disregard something declared by God to be the eternal sign of an eternal covenant? *Romans 2:28-29, Colossians 2:11.*

a) Something fundamental has changed. We are playing by new rules. There has been a shift in significance from outward sign to inward reality. Though physical circumcision was an absolute requirement of the Abrahamic covenant, the New Testament says outward circumcision is now in fact of no value. What *does* matter, according to the New Testament, is inner, spiritual circumcision, the spiritual circumcision of the heart.

ESV Romans 2:28-29 . . . no one is a Jew who is merely one outwardly, nor is circumcision outward and physical. But a Jew is one inwardly, and circumcision is a matter of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter.

ESV Colossians 2:11 . . . you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ . . .

b) In English we have dedicated words that mean unending, such as eternal or everlasting. The ancient Hebrews clearly understood the idea of something being eternal, but they had no dedicated Hebrew word for everlasting. "Everlasting" (17:7, 8) is from *olam* (5769), which fundamentally means "most distant times" (future or past) or literally "a long time" (Holladay). *TWOT* (#1631a) points out that "neither the Hebrew nor the Greek word (*aion*) in itself contains the idea of endlessness." Thus *olam* did double duty. In some contexts it clearly takes on the meaning of "everlasting." The proper meaning is determined by context and the translators have to decide which it is. *Olam* is used 300 times to denote indefinite continuance into the very distant future. Perhaps translating *olam* as "everlasting" with regard to the Abrahamic covenant was not the best translation.

15. The Hebrew word for "everlasting" is *olam* (17:7-8). What can we learn about its range of meanings from its use in 1 Samuel 1:22, 28, 27:8, 12?

ESV 1 Samuel 1:22, 28 Hannah . . . said to her husband, "As soon as the child [Samuel] is weaned, I will bring him, so that he may appear in the presence of the LORD and dwell there forever (*olam*) . . . Therefore I have lent him to the LORD. As long as he lives, he is lent to the LORD."

Samuel went to live with Eli in the tabernacle, but he did not live there forever.

ESV 1 Samuel 27:8 Now David and his men went up and made raids against the Geshurites . . . for these were the inhabitants of the land from of old (*olam*) . . .

The inhabitants of the land had not been there from eternity past!

NAS 1 Samuel 27:12 ~ So Achish believed David, saying, "He has surely made himself odious among his people Israel; therefore he will become my servant forever."

The Point: The Hebrew word *olam* does not fundamentally nor always mean everlasting. It can simply mean a long time.

\$64,000 Question: Did God intend the Promised Land to be Israel's forever—or—for a long time (Genesis 17:8)? (Rhetorical).

The descendants of Abram lived in the Promised Land off and on for roughly the next 2,000 years. By all accounts, was long time (*olam*). Then in A.D. 70 God expelled them from the land due to their unbelief in rejecting Jesus. They spent the next 2,000 years exiled from the land, not returning until very recently 1948. Coca Cola is older than modern Israel. Ford Motor Company is older than modern Israel. Some of you in this room may be older than modern Israel!

Due to the dual meaning of *olam*, controversy exists among Christians concerning present day Israel's divine right to own the land.

16. What does the New Testament's disregard for circumcision suggest about the physical promises of the Abrahamic covenant? Since the New Testament has clearly declared circumcision to be irrelevant, this suggests the other physical promises of the Abrahamic covenant are also irrelevant (land, seed, blessing). The physical promises of the covenant were shadows of the substance we have in Christ.⁷ The things of the Abraham were designed to be in effect until the Christ came, after that it had served its purpose.

Uniform Example: I recently found my dad's old Air Force uniform that he wore during the Korean War. It is an interesting piece of history, but it has served its purpose. The uniform is outdated, and my dad served his time in the Air Force. The uniform has served its purpose. After he got out of the Air Force, my dad never wore it again. It was no longer relevant in his life.

Scaffolding Example: Scaffolding is used until a building is constructed, then it is removed. The initial physical fulfillments of the Abrahamic Covenant were like scaffolding used until the final metaphysical fulfillments were complete.

Check Example: A check is valuable until it is deposited. After that it is merely an historical record with no cash value. The physical promises to Abraham were like a check. The spiritual fulfillments constitute the deposit of the check. The cancelled check is now nothing but an historical document.

Rocket Example: A rocket is designed to put a satellite or space capsule into orbit. However, once the capsule reaches attitude, the booster rocker falls away and back to earth, leaving the capsule (or satellite) alone. So also it is with the initial fulfillments of the promises to Abraham.

⁷ The land is a type of a heavenly country and the New Jerusalem. The seed was ultimately Jesus, along with anyone who has the faith of Abraham. The blessing being justification by faith, just as Abraham was.

Application: Those Christians who think the real estate promised to ancient Israel should still belong to the Jews fail to understand how radical and significant the change is that Jesus brought. If the physical sign of the covenant is now irrelevant, so are the physical promises of the covenant.

**** = ask this question before reading the text aloud. Doing so will cause focus.

- These lessons are designed for a 45 minute session and are based on the text of the ESV.
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Revised 03/04/2018