

052b - Do You Have to Follow the Old Testament Laws? Part 2 - Acts 15:12-19 - 2017-07-30

Call to Worship: Romans 15:10-11

Scripture Reading: Amos 9:8-15

Sermon: "Do You Have to Follow the Old Testament Laws? Part 2" Acts 15:12-19

Benediction: Romans 15:12-13

## INTRODUCTION

When God made the Old Covenant with Israel through Moses at Mount Sinai, it was instituted by the blood of animals without blemish, who were killed, and their blood sprinkled on the people. In that Old Covenant, God gave Israel many laws, and warned them sternly to obey them all. The foremost ritual law was circumcision of every male, on threat of any uncircumcised male being thrown out of the covenant.

When the Lord Jesus came, God made a New Covenant through Him. This new covenant was instituted not through the blood of animals, but through the blood of the perfect, sinless, righteous Jesus Christ, shed on the cross. His blood is sprinkled on sinners in the New Covenant. In this New Covenant, the sprinkling with blood of Christ cleanses the sinner from his sins. He is brought into the covenant not by a circumcision of the flesh, but of the circumcision of the heart, not of the male only, but of the female, too, there being no male or female in Christ.

But since the laws of the Old Covenant were from God Himself through Moses, and since the warnings against breaking them were so strong, and since the consequences for Israel's breaking them were so severe, and since the scriptures said that no man could be in the covenant without being circumcised, the thought remained in the minds of many of the Jewish Christians that any gentile who believed in Christ would have to be circumcised and taught to obey the Old Covenant laws of Moses.

The part of the word of God that starts in Acts 10 and culminates in chapter 15 asks and answers essentially this question: Do you have to follow the Old Testament laws? Last time, three weeks ago, we took up one aspect of that question: Do you have to follow the OT laws *to be saved*? Of course the answer is "No!" But we delighted ourselves in seeing how our Savior proved that definitively in the early days of the church, in his gracious dealings with the household of the gentile Cornelius, when our Lord sent Peter to preach the gospel them

God already had chosen that, through the mouth of Peter, the Gentiles should hear the word of the gospel and believe

Before Peter's sermon was even over, and before the Gentiles had done anything, God demonstrated that the gentiles were repenting of sin, and believing in Christ according to

the gospel, by giving them the outward manifestation of the Holy Spirit; that is, He made them praise God in foreign languages they had not learned.

In this God showed that He made no distinction between the circumcised and the uncircumcised, cleansing their hearts by faith

To name additional requirements for salvation, then, is wrong, since God Himself showed He has no additional requirements for the salvation of a sinner

Anyone who is saved is saved not by any religious ritual, but through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ.

So, our Lord Jesus, by the vision He gave Peter, by sending His Holy Spirit upon the gentiles before the sermon was even over, proved that salvation is by the grace of God toward sinners in Jesus Christ; all who are saved, whether Jew or Gentile, are saved through faith in Jesus Christ, without keeping any Old Testament laws, and even before being baptized. Our Lord Jesus Himself answered the question, do you have to follow the OT laws to be saved? His answer is, "NO!"

Today we take up there, where we left off last time, and observe how James and the other church leaders who were conferring on this issue received that instruction from the Lord, how they arrived at the conclusion the Lord Jesus was teaching them.

As I talk to you about this today, please understand that we are talking here about liberty, about freedom, in Christ Jesus our Savior. Of course I don't mean freedom from all obligations. There are true obligations laid upon us by our Lord, but our regenerated hearts rejoice in those obligations, knowing they are the perfect will of God. Those obligations are not burdensome; as Jesus said, when we take his yoke upon us, we find that His yoke is easy, and His burden is light. We are learning here in Acts 15 how to remove from our backs the false obligations laid on us by religious leaders who want to be teachers of the law, but do not know what they are talking about. Those false obligations are heavy; they constitute a yoke so heavy that Peter said we cannot bear it. Some of those false obligations are entirely man-made; some of them were laid upon Israel under the Old Covenant, but are now expired, and should not be laid upon people in these days of the New Covenant.

So, let's learn from that Jerusalem conference, especially from James, who lead the group to the right conclusion about what the Lord Jesus had taught them.

TEXT

Acts 15:12-19

## BODY

- I. James cited someone's experience (14)
  - A. Peter had told what happened with him and the household of Cornelius
    1. James took that into consideration
  - B. It is important to note that there were multiple witnesses to what Peter had to say
    1. there was a party of Jewish Christians who went with Peter
    2. there were the several gentiles converted to Christ at that time, including Cornelius
  - C. It is important to note that what Peter testified to was something visible
    1. he experienced a private vision from the Lord Jesus
    2. but what he testified to in this conference is what he and the others actually had seen and heard
- II. James observed that the scriptures agree with this experience (15-18)
  - A. Note that James saw the need to quote the scripture here
    1. Paul and Barnabas had testified of miracles God had done through them among the Gentiles, but James did not consider this the final word of the question
    2. Peter had testified of how God filled the Gentiles with the Holy Spirit without their having performed any religious ritual at all, giving an argument that was definitive, but James did not consider this the final word on the question
    3. James considered the question settled only when Paul's and Peter's testimony was confirmed by the scriptures
    4. APPLICATION A quite obvious application of this to ourselves comes here: Any experience or idea you encounter should not be considered authentic unless confirmed by the scriptures rightly interpreted.
      - a) this can be a great liberation to you; if you have thought that you have some obligation to believe people when they tell you their religious experience
  - B. Note what part of the scriptures James quoted
    1. a *major* theological question with huge practical implications was being considered here, in a conference of the church's apostles and elders; at a point of such importance, a relatively obscure passage from the minor prophets was quoted
    2. several times in Acts and the rest of the New Testament we see the apostles addressing issues in the church by reference to the Old Testament scriptures, sometimes to passages as obscure as this one in Amos
    3. APPLICATION: Let us not neglect any part of the scriptures; all of the bible is breathed out by God, and useful for us in several ways
    4. APPLICATION: Let us not think that the Old Testament scriptures do not apply to us; we are not subject to the Old Testament ceremonies; we do

not bind our civil governments to observe all the Old Testament laws, but only the principles in them; yet there is a moral code of love, set down in Ten Commandments that is God's moral law for all people; there are many lessons about our Lord Jesus Christ found in the Old Testament symbols; there are many principles to govern life in the church found many places in the Old Testament scriptures; let us read them and use them to our great benefit!

C. Note how James interpreted the OT prophecy he quoted

1. he was citing a passage that declares the restoration of the tabernacle of David, and the repopulating and rebuilding of Israel, and their resettlement in their land
2. and he interpreted that as taking place in the present, now 2000 years ago, not in times still future to us
3. APPLICATION: To interpret Old Testament prophecy as James did, we must see the promises of blessing on Israel, such as bringing the people back to the land, and making the land fruitful, as promises of spiritual blessing on God's church when Messiah comes; we do not look for the fulfillment of Amos's prophecies in physical blessings on the physical nation of Israel, but in spiritual blessings on the true Israel, consisting of all those who believe in Jesus as the Christ, the Messiah; This is liberty for you, for me, for Christians. We have often read these prophecies and thought it bound us to seek the welfare of the modern state called Israel. Be free of that! As to the people who insist that the church must support the nation of Israel politically, that the U.S. must support the nation of Israel militarily, that Christians must support pro-Israel causes financially, I urge you to leave that cause to those who believe in it, and not be caught up in it. Such people are misguided in what they are doing. Let our cause be the kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ!

D. Note what version of the bible James quoted here

1. he did not quote from the NIV, the King James, or any English translation, of course; they didn't exist then
2. James quoted from the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Old Testament scriptures, made in Egypt by Jewish scholars about 300 years before
3. note that James was addressing the church in Jerusalem, made up of Jews. He was addressing a dispute involving eminent bible scholars such as Paul and some other Pharisees, who were zealous for the Jewish, Hebrew customs over against the Greek, Hellenistic customs
4. he quoted a passage in which the Hebrew copies and the Greek translation differ on some words
5. yet he quoted the Septuagint, the Greek translation

6. APPLICATION: There is an ideology being promoted around us, with an overemphasis on the Jewishness of the church and the importance of the Hebrew language in understanding the New Testament scriptures
- E. Note the setting in which James invoked this scripture
    1. He is in a conference of the learned, those apostles appointed directly by Christ, and those elders appointed by selection of the church, and the whole church, the body of Christ
    2. He is not interpreting scripture by himself for himself, with no regard for the support of the church
  - F. Note how James references a known attribute of God (18)
    1. God has made things known long ahead of time
    2. He can do that because He knows all things
    3. He knows all things because all things that happen do so because of His decree that they will happen
    4. so it was no new thing, nothing novel, no innovation, the idea that the Gentiles would be saved
      - a) we have known this for hundreds of years through the prophets
      - b) God has known this always
- III. James then used reason to reach a conclusion (19)
- A. What James did NOT do
    1. express discontent with revelation God already had given
      - a) visions given to the apostles, but not to everyone
      - b) miracles already done
      - c) scriptures
    2. tell everyone to seek additional direct revelation
  - B. What he DID: he made use of the evidence given through divine revelation by using sound reasoning
    1. Greek word *dio*, meaning “wherefore” or “therefore” or “consequently” or “so”
    2. James took evidence from experience, seeing that it matches with scripture, and did a bit of logical reasoning to arrive at a conclusion
    3. note that if something does not make sense, it is not true.
      - a) when you talk about religion, about God, about Jesus Christ, you do not have to remove logic and reason from your mind
      - b) not that the carnal mind of the unbeliever sees the gospel as making sense; no, he considers it foolish; but he is wrong in that---it is not actually foolish, it is wise; it does make sense; it is logical and reasonable
    4. we believe in Jesus Christ, but not without very good reason!
    5. sometimes people talk about God as trinity and say it doesn't make sense, you just have to take it on faith
      - a) God is one, yet God is three - people say that doesn't make sense!
      - b) but it does make sense

- (1) God is one in essence
      - (2) God is three in persons
    - c) no one else is like that; it's part of the glory of God over against us creatures
      - (1) in all creation, there is no being who is more than one person
      - (2) but God is one being who is three persons
  - 6. sometimes people talk about the Lord Jesus as both man and God, and say it doesn't make sense, you just have to take it on faith
    - a) no other person is like that, so it strikes us as logically impossible
    - b) but it does make sense
      - (1) Christ is truly God; He has the divine nature
      - (2) Christ is truly man; He has the human nature
      - (3) in Him, and Him only, are the divine nature and the human nature to be found in one person
  - 7. the message of the bible would be a mushy, meaningless mess if it didn't make sense; but it does make sense; James knew that, and he used reason, logic, sense, to reach a conclusion
- C. What else James did: he made a judgment
- 1. this was an important church conference considering a vital theological issue, but James did not try to get some additional direct revelation from God
  - 2. instead, he took what God had given, and, using sound reasoning, made a judgment
  - 3. APPLICATION: Many of us, maybe most of us, have been taught that when important decisions need to be made, we are to seek some kind of direct special revelation from God
    - a) that doctrine gives an impression of being spiritual, but is not actually what our Lord has taught us in His word
    - b) this is an example of false, man-made obligations that make up a heavy yoke on the shoulders of Jesus' disciples
      - (1) you need to make a decision
      - (2) you have to somehow do what it takes to get a special revelation from God for that particular case
      - (3) brothers and sisters, throw off that burden; be free of it; stand upright and walk confidently in the Lord
    - c) when you have a decision to make, do not seek additional special revelation from God; instead, consider what you know from your experience, compare it with scripture, in counsel, and make a judgment

- IV. The conclusion James reached was that the church should not trouble those who are turning to God with any ritual requirements for salvation (19)
  - A. Salvation does not come to a sinner by his own works through any religious ritual, but by God's grace through faith in Jesus Christ
  - B. And so, to tell someone who is turning to God that a religious work of some kind is necessary causes that person trouble
    - 1. in that case it was circumcision, and other OT ceremonies
    - 2. in my case it was the saying of the sinner's prayer

## CONCLUSION

Be free, disciples of Jesus Christ! If the Son set you free, you are free indeed. You are at liberty to obey the perfect moral commandments God has given to all people, and the instructions the Lord Jesus has left for His New Covenant church, and ignore all the rest. You need not obey laws particular to the Old Covenant. You need not obey rules made up by men. You need not be tied up in knots by a vain effort to "hear from God" about the questions you face. Live in liberty under the blessed rule of the King of kings, our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Trinity 89 Come, Thou Almighty King  
Trinity 403 Not What My Hands Have Done  
Trinity 533 What a Friend We Have in Jesus  
Grace 16 Be Thou My Vision