

"The Battle for Liberty"

Part 1

Acts 15

Introduction: Last week in our study of Acts we followed with Paul and Barnabas as they ended the first missionary journey and they returned to Antioch from where it all began. After they arrived at Antioch, we were told that they stayed there for a long time with the disciples. This is when the events of Acts 15 took place. Acts 15 is a chapter of great importance because it is in this chapter where we find Christian liberty defended. If there was a theme verse for this chapter, I suppose it would be found in Galatians 5.

Galatians 5:1

Stand fast therefore in the liberty wherewith Christ hath made us free, and be not entangled again with the yoke of bondage.

Notice the words of Charles Woodbridge on this chapter.

"This chapter is the Christian's emancipation proclamation.... The clash was between salvation by works and by faith, between merit and grace, the bondage of legalism and the liberty of the gospel, external ritual and internal trust in the Redeemer....In many respects this chapter is epochal. Its major affirmation of the principle of grace is fundamental."

I. The Defense of the Gospel.

Part 1

Notice Acts 15:1

Here we see that there were several men who came from the area of Judea and they were teaching that in order to be saved the Gentiles would need to be circumcised after the manner of Moses. These men were not sent out by the church at Jerusalem, but instead they were Jews who made the choice to make the 300-mile journey on their own. They had heard about the salvation of the many Gentiles in Antioch. These men were not saved and we can know this because they did not have an understanding of the Gospel. The Gospel is that we are saved by grace through faith in the finished work of Jesus Christ PLUS NOTHING.

Acts 16:29-31

²⁹ Then he called for a light, and sprang in, and came trembling, and fell down before Paul and Silas,

³⁰ And brought them out, and said, *Sirs, what must I do to be saved?*

³¹ And they said, *Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved*, and thy house.

Ephesians 2:8-9

⁸ *For by grace are ye saved through faith*; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God:

⁹ Not of works, lest any man should boast.

Getting back to the false teachers these men were trusting in works plus Jesus Christ for salvation. It is important to note that this was an attack from within the church. These men professed to be saved but they were not trusting in Jesus Christ alone. They had brought works into salvation. This is what Jesus warned about in Matthew 13.

Matthew 13:24-30

²⁴ Another parable put he forth unto them, saying, *The kingdom of heaven is likened unto a man which sowed good seed in his field:*

²⁵ But while men slept, his enemy came and sowed tares among the wheat, and went his way.

²⁶ But when the blade was sprung up, and brought forth fruit, then appeared the tares also.

²⁷ So the servants of the householder came and said unto him, *Sir, didst not thou sow good seed in thy field? from whence then hath it tares?*

²⁸ He said unto them, *An enemy hath done this. The servants said unto him, Wilt thou then that we go and gather them up?*

²⁹ But he said, *Nay; lest while ye gather up the tares, ye root up also the wheat with them.*

³⁰ Let both grow together until the harvest: and in the time of harvest I will say to the reapers, *Gather ye together first the tares, and bind them in bundles to burn them: but gather the wheat into my barn.*

These men who had come from Judea were tares among the wheat. They were men who were being used by Satan in an attempt to contaminate the Gospel message. These men were saying, "Faith alone is not enough. All Gentile believers are lost if they fail to submit

to circumcision and become like Jews." The attack was not over whether Jesus was the Son of God, the true Messiah of Israel. Rather, the dispute focused on what a person must do in order to be saved.

Notice Acts 15:2

Paul and Barnabas stood up to these men and defended the Gospel. There was a strong heated debate that took place between Paul and Barnabas and these men. It was then determined that Paul and Barnabas should carry the matter before the Apostles and the elders at Jerusalem. As they would travel the 300 miles to Jerusalem, I am sure there were many questions on their minds. How are we going to be accepted by the Apostles and the elders? These false teachers had come from the area of Jerusalem. Did the Apostles and elders know they were coming? How is Peter going to respond to our stand? Let me show you something that had transpired earlier.

Galatians 2:11-14

¹¹ But when Peter was come to Antioch, I withstood him to the face, because he was to be blamed.

¹² For before that certain came from James, he did eat with the Gentiles: but when they were come, he withdrew and separated himself, fearing them which were of the circumcision.

¹³ And the other Jews dissembled likewise with him; insomuch that Barnabas also was carried away with their dissimulation.

¹⁴ But when I saw that they walked not uprightly according to the truth of the gospel, I said unto Peter before them all, If thou, being a Jew, livest after the manner of Gentiles, and not as do the Jews, why compellest thou the Gentiles to live as do the Jews?

By the time Acts 15 takes place Peter has repented and had agreed with Paul's position completely. There may have been many questions in the minds of Paul and Barnabas but the trip they would make was of significant importance to set the record straight.

Application:

In our study of Understanding the Chaos I had made mention of how Satan will come against believers as he came against Abel by using Cain and Abel was a prophet. He wanted to silence the message of Abel and he had Cain kill Abel in that attempt. Today our enemy wants to silence us as he also wanted to do to Paul and Barnabas and in the first two verse of Acts 15, I can see that one of his tools was intimidation. These men came to Antioch

and were very straight forward with what they taught. They had no problem standing toe to toe with Paul and Barnabas as they had the heated debate. This was Satan's attempt to intimidate Paul and Barnabas to silence the true Gospel and to also preach a false Gospel. This is why it is so important that we know the Word of God and that we stand firm upon it. When Satan sends someone to intimidate us, they will be very confident in what they believe and they will be willing to stand their ground and fight for their false Gospel. I can assure you they will not be weak spineless men. They will be men who try to intimidate.

Notice Acts 15:3

As they passed through these areas there were questions from believers about where they were going. This led to sharing with them about the conversion of the Gentiles and this then led to great joy with the brethren. Let us notice what had happened in Samaria earlier.

Acts 8:5-8

⁵ Then Philip went down to the city of Samaria, and preached Christ unto them.

⁶ And the people with one accord gave heed unto those things which Philip spake, hearing and seeing the miracles which he did.

⁷ For unclean spirits, crying with loud voice, came out of many that were possessed with them: and many taken with palsies, and that were lame, were healed.

⁸ And there was great joy in that city.

Notice Acts 15:4

What a joy it must have been for Paul and Barnabas when they were received of the apostles and elders. They were able to share all they had experienced on the first missionary journey and how God had opened the door for the Gentiles and they witnessed many who were saved. What a great meeting this must have been and there would have been much rejoicing and praising of God. But it would not happen without another attempt at division.

Notice Acts 15:5

These Pharisees were not the same as the men in verse 1 and they were not preaching the same message. These Pharisees were saved and they were not saying that the Gentiles needed to be circumcised in order to be saved, they were saying that after they were saved, they needed to be circumcised and to come under the Law. These two groups were

being used to attack from different angles. The first group wanted to include the Law for salvation this second group wanted to include the Law for sanctification. Notice what Scofield says concerning these two teachings.

"The test of the gospel is grace. If the message excludes grace, or mingles law with grace as the means of justification or sanctification, or denies the fact or guilt of sin which alone gives grace its occasion and opportunity, it is "another" gospel, and the preacher of it is under the anathema of God."

Let us for a moment stop and think about why the Jews were so set on the Law being part of salvation or part of sanctification for the Gentiles. They were saying that Gentiles, in order to be saved, must become like Jews. These Pharisees had a Biblical basis for what they were saying. The Bible they had was the Old Testament, and these Jews had mastered the Old Testament. These men could quote much of the Old Testament by heart. These Pharisees were not ignorant people; they knew the Bible very well. They were convinced that salvation was of the Jews, and to be saved a Gentile must submit to Jewish circumcision and obey the commands found in the law of Moses. They considered the Christian faith to be a movement within Judaism and that Gentile believers must conform to Judaism.

Notice Acts 15:6-9

Peter tells them that the hearts of the Gentiles were purified by faith. This was the circumcision that was important. The circumcision of the heart. Circumcision was a mark of God's covenant people but it was also a picture of what God desired to do within the heart of every individual.

Romans 2:25-29

²⁵ For circumcision verily profiteth, if thou keep the law: but if thou be a breaker of the law, thy circumcision is made uncircumcision.

²⁶ Therefore if the uncircumcision keep the righteousness of the law, shall not his uncircumcision be counted for circumcision?

²⁷ And shall not uncircumcision which is by nature, if it fulfil the law, judge thee, who by the letter and circumcision dost transgress the law?

²⁸ For he is not a Jew, which is one outwardly; neither is that circumcision, which is outward in the flesh:

²⁹ But he is a Jew, which is one inwardly; and circumcision is that of the heart, in the spirit, and not in the letter; whose praise is not of men, but of God.

Let me take you into the mind of the Pharisees again. In the Old Testament the Israelites were required to do two things. First, they were required to keep the outward ceremonies or ordinances commanded by God. Second, they were required to have an inward heart attitude in which they trusted and believed in God. Now they were saved by faith and not by keeping the Law. But if one believed in God but refused to keep the outward ordinances they could be put to death. Moses is an example.

Exodus 4:24-26

²⁴ And it came to pass by the way in the inn, that the LORD met him, and sought to kill him.

²⁵ Then Zipporah took a sharp stone, and cut off the foreskin of her son, and cast it at his feet, and said, Surely a bloody husband art thou to me.

²⁶ So he let him go: then she said, A bloody husband thou art, because of the circumcision.

Moses almost died because he did not keep the outward ordinance of circumcision with his son. So, the Pharisees in Acts 15 were thinking back into the Old Testament and they were saying, "If the Gentiles ignore the outward ordinances that were required, they would be killed and we do not want to be responsible!" Peter was countering this thinking by telling them that God knew their hearts and their hearts were purified by faith not by keeping the Law.

Conclusion:

Notice Acts 15:8-9 again.

They did not understand that Jesus Christ was the end of the Law. Now they were in the Age of Grace and salvation was by grace through faith alone. There are two ordinances that we are commanded to keep. Baptism and the Lord's Table but they are not required to be saved.