

November 5, 2023

"Freedom From Expectations"

Acts 15:1-11

## Lesson 1

**Intro**

Most of the first Christians were Jewish, and they participated in those practices required by the Law of Moses. Gentiles who converted to Judaism (proselytes) were required to be circumcised, the sign of the covenant between God and Abraham in Genesis 17. This showed Israel to be God's people, "the children of Abraham". When Gentiles began converting to Christianity in the 1<sup>st</sup> Century, some Jewish believers called for and taught that these Gentiles should also be circumcised so they could be "the children of Abraham".

The question of whether or not this circumcision was necessary came up many times as Paul and Barnabas were on their missionary journey. These two preached to both Jews and Gentiles. So the churches in Asia Minor where Paul and Barnabas preached asked them to go back to Jerusalem and talk with the other apostles about this issue. The "Jerusalem Council" met to discuss this topic, with their decision recorded in chapter 15 of Acts.

**Read Acts 15:1-11**

1. vs. 1: Though Judea is south of Antioch, "coming down" is used as Judea is on a mountain top  
The ones who came were not named here, indicting the church hadn't sent them  
They were teaching the believers that males had to be circumcised like the OT law said  
The issue at stake isn't whether or not Gentiles would be accepted as people of God  
The church had already celebrated God's work in them in Acts 11  
The issue is "how" (the means) Gentiles enter into the community of God's people
2. vs. 2: Paul and Barnabas were accepted as leaders, as apostles, in the church  
These two leaders had "sharp dispute and debate" with those advocating circumcision  
The apostles preach one is justified by faith, not by following the Law  
The church in Antioch wants clarification about this issue: which is the right thing to do?  
They send Paul and Barnabas to Jerusalem to consult with the apostles there  
The apostles in Jerusalem are the surviving members of the Twelve called by Jesus  
The elders are church leaders but not apostles
3. vs. 3: As they head to Jerusalem, they visit various groups of believers on the way  
They tell these groups about the Gentile's conversion, which makes all glad  
These people formerly at odds with God were now reconciled to Him
4. vs. 4: Paul and Barnabas are welcomed by the church leaders  
They give a report of what they have done, of how God has used them
5. vs. 5: Some of the ones who came to Antioch were Pharisees, we are told here  
Pharisees were known for their strict observance of the Law  
This would include the need to be circumcised to be admitted to God's people  
That is what they advocate for here in front of the apostles and elders

6. vs. 6: This verse says “the apostles and elders met to consider this question.  
This suggests that a “closed door” meeting was held  
They met privately, while the other two parties waited somewhere else
7. vs. 7: “Much discussion” occurred, and then Peter gets up to speak  
Peter was one of the original 12 disciples of Jesus  
He also denied Him, and was reinstated by Him  
As such, He has a full and unique experience to speak from  
He reminds them the he himself was used by God to preach the gospel to the Gentiles  
This is a fulfillment of the promise God made to Abraham of “all nations”
8. vs. 8: Peter goes on to remind them of two important factors  
First, God knows hearts of everyone  
He knows the hearts of Jews and of Gentiles, if they love Him or not  
Second, Peter saw the Holy Spirit given to Cornelius’ household when they believed  
This is evidence that they were part of God’s family
9. vs. 9: Peter finishes his comparison by noting that God does not discriminate  
There isn’t Jew or Gentile in God’s world, only those who believe in Jesus or not  
Those who do have their hearts “purified...by faith”  
That’s who belongs to God and is a member of His family
10. vs. 10: Peter notes to the council that they couldn’t keep the Law, nor could their ancestors  
Why should they think/expect that the Gentiles would be able to?  
He also says that they are testing God by asking the Gentiles to be circumcised  
The testing is thinking that God’s will for people is in Jewish hands  
God didn’t make a mistake in giving His spirit to Cornelius’ household, and others  
The Law is good, but it is inadequate and incomplete in accomplishing salvation
11. vs. 11: The Gospel is here proclaimed again  
“It is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved”  
This is the only way to salvation, not through circumcision or any other rite

Application: The conflict presented here was best handled head-on, rather than avoiding or ignoring it.  
Evading problems usually allows them to get worse. The 1<sup>st</sup> Century church met the issue of  
grace vs. circumcision directly, by meeting and discussing together the correct way to deal  
with it. They resolved the problem while staying true to the gospel of Jesus, that His grace  
alone is all that is needed for salvation. It is not through tradition or achievement that we are  
saved, but in Christ alone.

Prayer: Father God, thank You for Your mercy and Your plan of salvation. Help us to treat others with the  
same kindness and grace that You have given us, and to share with others Your plan of salvation.  
In Jesus’ name, Amen.

