

The Council in Jerusalem
(Acts 15:1-35)
Expository Lessons from the Book of Acts

I. Background and Introduction

- a. In recent lessons, we discussed the start of the church in Antioch, in the northern part of ancient Syria. This became a launching point for great missionary work to spread the gospel to the east and west.
- b. Paul and Barnabas embarked from Antioch on Paul's first missionary trip, and they returned there at the end.
- c. In the beginning of Acts, the gospel is going to the Jews. However, now Peter (to the household of Cornelius, in **Acts 10-11**) and Paul (on his first missionary journey, in **Acts 13-14**) have started preaching to Gentiles and converting them.
- d. A great controversy regarding the Gentile converts arises, starting in Antioch (where Paul was). This results in a council of the apostles and elders in Jerusalem to resolve the issue, in **Acts 15**.
- e. Some reasons why understanding the events of **Acts 15** is important for us include:
 - i. Here we encounter a problem that is defined and resolved entirely in one chapter. However, this issue would continue to pop up in the early church, during the lifetimes of the apostles. People today have misunderstood and misapplied some of Paul's other writings because they do not understand the problem he was addressing. We need to understand the issue being addressed in this chapter in order to understand Paul's writing in other places, especially in:
 1. **Galatians** (virtually the whole letter is devoted to this),
 2. **Ephesians 2**,
 3. **Colossians 2**,
 4. **Romans**, and
 5. Some of the events later in **Acts**.
 - ii. There are specific commands in this chapter that Christians are called to follow, which many today are unaware of.

iii. In this chapter we discover another wonderful prophecy regarding the resurrection of Jesus. Although understood by Christians in the early days of the church, it is largely unknown today.

1. This prophecy may also shed some light on a statement in **John 2**.

II. The Controversy

a. Read **Acts 14:26-15:5**.

b. Storyline

- i. In Antioch, Gentiles were becoming Christians, but were not getting circumcised in accordance with the Law of Moses.
- ii. Jewish Christians from Judea came to Antioch and were teaching that the Gentiles needed to be circumcised. This causes great controversy in the church in Antioch.
- iii. The church sends Barnabas and Paul to Jerusalem to discuss this issue with the apostles and elders there.
- iv. The position of the Pharisees (a strict sect of the Jews) in Jerusalem who had embraced the Christian faith: Gentiles *need to be circumcised and to keep the Law of Moses*.

1. "But some of the sect of the Pharisees who believed rose up, saying, 'It is necessary to circumcise them, and to command them to keep the law of Moses.'" (**Acts 15:5**, NKJV)

v. The big question before the church: *What do we do with the Gentiles who are coming to faith?*

c. **Question:** *Why* were these Jewish Christians so concerned about the Gentiles becoming circumcised?

i. Read **Genesis 17:1-14**.

1. The Lord had told Abraham that the covenant marked by circumcision was an "*everlasting covenant*".

2. Any male not circumcised has broken the covenant and will be cut off from God's people.

ii. On the face of it, this does not seem to be an unreasonable concern on the part of the Pharisees.

iii. Note, the Pharisees were demanding that the Gentiles keep the entire law of Moses, including circumcision!

III. The Council Meets and Debates the Issue

- a. Read **Acts 15:6-21**.
- b. Recap:
 - i. At the council of elders and apostles, first there is a period of *open debate and discussion*.
 - ii. Then *Peter speaks* and recounts the events of **Acts 10** (the Gentile household of Cornelius coming to faith).
 1. He reminded them of a story they were already familiar with.
 - a. “You know that a good while ago...” (**Acts 15:7**)
 2. God had acknowledged the Gentiles in the household of Cornelius by “giving them the Holy Spirit, just as He did to us...”
 - a. Peter saw the descent of the Holy Spirit upon the uncircumcised Gentiles “just as He did to us” (which I assume points back to the events on Pentecost in **Acts 2:1-4**) as a clear confirmation from God that Gentiles could be acceptable to God without circumcision.
 - b. Peter refers to the Law of Moses as *a burdensome yoke* that neither they nor their forefathers were able to bear.
 - i. “Now therefore, why do you test God by putting a yoke on the neck of the disciples which neither our fathers nor we were able to bear?” (**Acts 15:10**, NKJV)
 - c. **Question:** Does that mean we, after becoming Christians, *no longer have any ‘yoke’ at all?*
 - i. Jesus said: “Come to Me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. *Take My yoke upon you* and learn from Me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For *My yoke is easy and My burden is light.*” (**Matthew 11:28-30**, NKJV)
 1. Many focus on the word “easy” here. This is a famous passage, and almost all English language translations use the word “easy”, going back at least to the

Geneva Bible (the New Testament of which was published in 1557).

- a. The Geneva Bible preceded the KJV by about 50 years.
2. The Douay-Rheims (RC) describes the yoke of Jesus as “sweet”; the Wycliffe Bible renders it “soft”.
 3. Elsewhere in the New Testament, this word is generally translated “good”, “useful” or “beneficial”.
 - a. This is the same word used in the LXX in **Psalm 34:8 (Psalm 33** in Bibles based on the Masoretic Text), where it says, “Taste and see that the Lord is *good* [or gracious].”
 - b. The Greek word describing this yoke, typically rendered “easy” in **Matthew 11:28-30** and “good” in **Psalm 34:8** of the LXX, is *chrestos* / *χρηστός*.
 4. Also, note that the meaning of the English word “easy” has shifted over time. For example, when I think of something being “easy”, I generally think of it as something requiring little or no effort on my part. However, from the 1828 *American Dictionary of the English Language (which Noah Webster, a Bible translator himself, compiled to help others understand the meaning of words as used in the Bible as well as in common use)*, the definition of “easy” includes:
 - a. “Free from pain, disturbance or annoyance”;
 - b. “Presenting no great obstacles”; and
 - c. “Not heavy or burdensome.”

- ii. **Bottom Line:** *There is a yoke we take on in following Jesus. Our righteousness must exceed that of the scribes and Pharisees. (Matthew 5:20).* Jesus says it is a good and appropriate, well-fitting yoke. It is not like the burdensome yoke handed down from Moses.
 1. “Enter by the narrow gate; for wide is the gate and broad is the way that leads to destruction, and there are many who go in by it. Because narrow is the gate and difficult is the way which leads to life, and there are few who find it.” (Matthew 7:13–14, NKJV)
- iii. Next, after Peter speaks, *Barnabas and Paul* tell of the miracles that God did through them as they took the gospel to the Gentiles.
 1. “Now it happened in Iconium that they went together to the synagogue of the Jews, and so spoke that a great multitude both of the Jews and of the Greeks believed. But the unbelieving Jews stirred up the Gentiles and poisoned their minds against the brethren. Therefore they stayed there a long time, speaking boldly in the Lord, who was bearing witness to the word of His grace, granting signs and wonders to be done by their hands.” (Acts 14:1–3, NKJV)
 2. Also, they had healed a man crippled from birth in Lystra. (Acts 14)
- iv. *James speaks last*, making the point that everything stated by Peter and Paul regarding the Gentiles is in *fulfillment of a prophecy* in **Amos**, and concludes:
 1. The Gentiles do not have to be circumcised, nor do they need to follow the whole Law of Moses.
 2. However, James points to four things that the Gentiles must do that are related to the writings of Moses:
 - a. Abstain from idolatry
 - b. Abstain from sexual immorality
 - c. Abstain from things strangled
 - d. Abstain from blood.

- c. Let us consider the prophecy of **Amos** that James cites in this passage.
- i. Read **Acts 15:15-17**.
 1. “And with this the words of the prophets agree, just as it is written: ‘After this I will return And will rebuild the tabernacle of David, which has fallen down; I will rebuild its ruins, And I will set it up; So that the rest of mankind may seek the LORD, Even all the Gentiles who are called by My name, Says the LORD who does all these things.” (**Acts 15:15-17**, NKJV)
 - ii. Note that his quote from **Amos**, especially the part related to the application James makes in **v. 17** regarding the Gentiles, follows the LXX rather than the Masoretic Text.
 1. Read **Amos 9:11-12** (from a Bible where the Old Testament is based on the LXX text).
 2. From the NKJV (where the Old Testament is based on the Masoretic Text):
 - a. “On that day I will raise up The tabernacle of David, which has fallen down, And repair its damages; I will raise up its ruins, And rebuild it as in the days of old; That they may possess the remnant of Edom, And all the Gentiles who are called by My name,” Says the LORD who does this thing.” (**Amos 9:11-12**, NKJV)
 3. This Scripture is considered the definitive closing argument by the apostles for this significant issue that has brought together the apostles and elders. The **Amos** passage seals the case made by Peter and Paul.
 - a. Note that none of the other apostles or elders responded, “Hey, *wait...* that is not what it says in **Amos** in my Bible!”
 - b. **Question:** What does that tell you about the Old Testament text that James and the other apostles were reading from?
 - c. Even if you don’t know any Greek, you can see for yourself how the LXX of **Amos 9** compares to the quote from James in **Acts 15**. You can do this by looking up both passages in an interlinear Greek combined New Testament and Old Testament (LXX), such as the *Apostolic Bible Polyglot*.

- iii. Consider how James understood this passage from **Amos**.
 - 1. The fallen tabernacle of David has been rebuilt/restored.
 - a. In the **Amos 9:11** in the LXX it also uses the Greek word *anistemi* / ἀνίστημι. As we have seen in prior lessons, that word means “raise up” (including raising someone up from the dead). It appears in several prophecies about the resurrection of Jesus.
 - 2. Now the Gentiles can seek the Lord.
- iv. Clearly, James understood the first part of this passage he quoted from **Amos 9** to be a prophecy about *the resurrection of Jesus*.
 - 1. Word play is used here (in which a word is used that can have more than one meaning). The term ‘tabernacle/tent’ is used figuratively to refer to the fleshly body of a person.
 - 2. Other examples of words in Scripture having more than one meaning:
 - a. Sleep/wake up, which is used as a metaphor for death, in the following passages:
 - i. **Genesis 49:9** prophecy about Jesus, the lion of Judah: “He bows down, and *slept* as a lion and a lion’s cub; and who shall *rouse him?*” (LXX, OSB)
 - 1. Also, see similar in **Numbers 24:9**.
 - ii. **1 Thessalonians 4:14-16**, where Paul speaks of the Second Coming of Jesus: “I do not want you to be ignorant about those who have *fallen asleep*...those who are alive...will by no means precede those who are *asleep*...” (NKJV)
 - iii. **1 Corinthians 15:51-52**, a passage about the bodily resurrection of the dead.
 - iv. **Daniel 12:1-2**, a prophecy regarding the resurrection: “...many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, Some to everlasting life, Some to shame and everlasting contempt.” (NKJV)
 - v. **John 11:11-14**, where Jesus spoke figuratively about the death of Lazarus: “Our friend Lazarus sleeps, but I go that I may wake him up.” (NKJV)

3. Other places where “tabernacle/temple/tent” is used to refer to a person’s physical body include:
 - a. **2 Corinthians 5:1**, where Paul is speaking of the resurrection of the flesh that we eagerly anticipate.
 - i. “For we know that if our earthly house, this tent, is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens.” (**2 Corinthians 5:1**, NKJV)
 - ii. This statement by Paul may have been influenced by a similar statement in **Wisdom of Solomon 9:15** regarding our corruptible bodies being described as “this earthly tent”.
 - b. **2 Peter 1:13-15**, where Peter uses this figure to speak of his approaching death.
 - i. “Yes, I think it is right, as long as I am in this *tent*, to stir you up by reminding you, knowing that shortly I must put off my tent, just as our Lord Jesus Christ showed me. Moreover, I will be careful to ensure that you always have a reminder of these things after my decease.” (**2 Peter 1:13-15**, NKJV)
 - c. **1 Corinthians 6:19**.
 - i. “Or do you not know that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you...” (**1 Corinthians 6:19**, NKJV)
 - d. **2 Corinthians 6:16**.
 - i. “And what agreement has the *temple of God* with idols? For you are the *temple of the living God*. As God has said: ‘I will dwell in them And walk among them...’” (**2 Corinthians 6:16**, NKJV)
 - e. **John 1:14** [*Thanks to David Sanabria for pointing out this one, following the lesson.*]
 - i. “And the Word became flesh *and dwelt among us...*” (**John 1:14**, NKJV)
 - ii. There, the phrase generally translated “*dwelt among us*” or “*made his dwelling among us*” is

literally, in the Greek text: “*tabernacled* among us”.

- iii. “And the Word became flesh and *did tabernacle* among us....” (**John 1:14**, Young’s Literal Translation)
- f. Now, let us reconsider what it says in **John 2**, after Jesus cleared the temple. Read **John 2:18-22**.
- i. Jesus said. “destroy this temple, and I will rebuild it in three days”. The ‘temple’ he was referring to, figuratively, was his body.
 - ii. “Therefore, *when He had risen from the dead*, His disciples remembered that He had said this to them; and they *believed the Scripture* and the word which Jesus had said.” (**John 2:22**, NKJV)
 - 1. When John says that after Jesus was raised from the dead, the disciples remembered this statement of Jesus and “believed the Scripture.”
 - iii. **Question:** What is “the Scripture” that John is referring to, which reminded them of what Jesus had said, and which was fulfilled by Jesus being raised from the dead?
 - iv. **Possible Answer:** It seems to me that the most likely answer to the question is the prophecy of **Amos 9:11-12**. That is the only prophecy I am aware of, connected with the resurrection of Jesus, that speaks of a fallen-down temple or tabernacle being rebuilt.
 - 1. We know, from what James said in **Acts 15**, that the apostles understood that prophecy to be referring to the resurrection of Jesus!
4. Early Christian writers commented on this prophecy from **Amos 9**.
- a. Irenaeus (c. 130-200 AD) had in his youth been a disciple of Polycarp, who in turn had been a disciple of the apostle John. Irenaeus also became bishop of the church in Lyons, in Gaul (modern-day France). In a

word called *Proof (or Demonstration) of the Apostolic Preaching* (which is not included in the Ante-Nicene Fathers set), Irenaeus wrote:

- i. “And He showed forth the resurrection, becoming Himself ‘*the firstborn from among the dead*’ (**Colossians 1:18**), and raised in Himself prostrate man, being lifted up to the heights of heaven, at the right hand of the glory of the Father, as God had promised through the prophet, saying: ‘*I will raise up the tabernacle of David, that is fallen*’ (**Amos 9:11**), that is, the body sprung from David; and this was in truth accomplished by our Lord Jesus Christ, in the triumph of our redemption, that He raise us in truth, setting us free to the Father.”
 1. (Source: Irenaeus, *Proof of the Apostolic Preaching*, translated by Smith, Joseph P., Paulist Press, sec. 38; p. 72)
- ii. “Therefore, again the prophet says: ‘*In that day I will raise up the tabernacle of David, that is fallen*’ (**Amos 9:11**); clearly, he is declaring the body of Christ – born, as we said before, of David – as raised after death from the dead; for the body is called a ‘tabernacle’. For in these passages, both that He who according to the flesh was of the seed of David, the anointed, would be the Son of God, and that after His death He would rise again, and that He would be in figure man, but in power God, and that He would be judge of the whole world, and sole worker of justice and redeemer – all has been declared by the Scripture.”
 1. (Source: Irenaeus, *Proof of the Apostolic Preaching*, translated by Smith, Joseph P., Paulist Press, sec. 62; p. 89)
- b. From Methodius, who was apparently a bishop in Lycia (died c. 311 AD):
 - i. “For the term ‘resurrection’ is not applied to that which has not fallen, but to that which has fallen and rises again; as when the prophet says, ‘*I will also raise up again the tabernacle of David which*

has fallen down.' (**Amos 9:11**) Now the much-desired tabernacle of the soul is fallen and sunk down into *'the dust of the earth.'* (**Daniel 12:2**) For it is not that which is not dead, but that which is dead, that is laid down. But it is the flesh which dies; the soul is immortal.

- ii. "So, then, if the soul be immortal, and the body be the corpse, those who say that there is a resurrection, but not of the flesh, deny any resurrection; because it is not that which remains standing, but that which has fallen and been laid down, that is set up; according to that which is written, *'Does not he who falls rise again, and he who turns aside return?'* (**Jeremiah 8:4**)"
 - 1. (Source: Methodius, from *The Discourse on the Resurrection*, part 1, chapter 12; found in Ante-Nicene Fathers vol. 6, p. 367)
- v. Recall that after His resurrection, Jesus appeared to the apostles and explained to them that all the things that had happened, including his resurrection, were in fulfillment of prophecies contained throughout the Old Testament.
 - 1. "[Jesus said] ...'all things *must be fulfilled which were written in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms concerning Me.*' And He opened their understanding, that they might comprehend the Scriptures. Then He said to them, "Thus it is written, and thus *it was necessary for the Christ to suffer and to rise from the dead the third day...*" (**Luke 24:44-46**, NKJV)
 - 2. Let us review the *prophecies regarding the resurrection of Jesus* we have encountered thus far in **Acts**; and note how they draw from all major parts of the Old Testament!
 - a. From the Law of Moses:
 - i. In **Deuteronomy 18:15-19** it says the Lord will "raise up" a prophet like Moses (cited by Peter in **Acts 3** and by Stephen in **Acts 7**)
 - b. From the Prophets:
 - i. In **Amos 9:11-12** it says that the fallen tabernacle of David would be "raised up" (cited by James in **Acts 15**)

c. From the **Historical Books**:

- i. **2 Samuel 7** and **1 Chronicles 17**, where the Lord told David that He would “raise up” one of his descendants to sit on the throne to rule over the eternal kingdom (cited by Peter in **Acts 2** and alluded to by Paul in **Acts 13**)
- ii. **1 Samuel 2:35**, where the prophet told Eli that in the future, the Lord would “raise up” a faithful priest who will be over the faithful house of God (alluded to by Peter in **Acts 3** when he testified to the resurrection of Jesus and said that all the prophets “from Samuel on” had prophesied about the things that had just happened).

d. From the **Psalms** (the Poetic Books):

- i. **Psalm 16** (designated **Psalm 15** in the LXX), where David said, “my soul will not be left in Hades, nor will my body see decay” (cited by Peter in **Acts 2** and by Paul in **Acts 13** as applying to the Christ, descended from David)
- ii. **Psalms 89 (88)** and **132 (131)**, where the promise given to David in **2 Samuel 7** is confirmed with an oath from the Lord (alluded to by Peter in **Acts 2** and by Paul in **Acts 13**)

- 3. As we continue our journey through the Book of Acts, we are adding to our collection of precious gems: the prophecies used by the apostles in the beginning to persuade unbelievers to have faith in Jesus!

IV. The Letter from the Apostles and Elders is Sent Outa. Read **Acts 15:22-35**.

- i. “It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us....” (**Acts 15:28**)
- ii. The Gentiles are informed that they do NOT need to be circumcised and do NOT need to follow the entire Law of Moses.
- iii. The letter lists four things from the writings of Moses that the Gentile believers must abstain from. These are:
 - 1. things offered to idols,
 - 2. blood,

3. things strangled, and
 4. sexual immorality.
- iv. The letter goes out from Jerusalem, including to Antioch.
- b. **Question:** Why were *these parts* of the Law the only ones that were focused on here?
- i. A good friend of mine (Arber Borici, a listener who lives in British Columbia, Canada) recently pointed out to me that this prohibition of blood is reminiscent of a command that is contained in the writings of Moses, but which is much more ancient than the Law of Moses given at Mount Sinai. It goes back to the Lord's covenant with Noah, given right after the Flood.
 - ii. Read **Genesis 9:1-6**.
 1. It appears that prior to this point in time, people were vegetarians.
 2. Note that here we find a similar prohibition on eating or drinking the blood of animals. All men were prohibited from eating meat with the lifeblood still in it.
 3. At this point in time, people were allowed to eat the flesh of all kinds of animals of the land and sea (including pigs, reptiles, shellfish and other animals which later would be designated 'unclean' in **Leviticus 11**).
 4. Therefore, it does seem reasonable and logical that the prohibition on blood in **Acts 15** may indeed go back to the restrictions more ancient than the Law of Moses, which were given in the days of Noah.
 - iii. Also, in the *Apostolic Constitutions*, we find the following interesting commentary on the restrictions handed down by the apostles in **Acts 15**:
 1. "[quoting from the words of James in **Acts 15**] 'Known to God are all His works from the beginning of the world. Wherefore my sentence is, that we do not trouble those who from among the Gentiles turn unto God: but to charge them that they abstain from the pollutions of the Gentiles, and from what is sacrificed to idols, and from blood, and from things strangled, and from fornication' (**Acts 15:18-20 & 15:29**); *which laws were given to the ancients who lived before the law*, under the

law of nature, Enos, Enoch, Noah, Melchizedek, Job, and if there be any other of the same sort.”

- a. (Source: *Constitutions of the Holy Apostles*, book 6, section 3, chapter 12; found in Ante-Nicene Fathers vol. 7, p. 455)
- iv. Take-aways for us regarding the prohibition on blood.
1. This prohibition still applies to Christians today. It appears to go back to ancient times, to a universal command given to mankind prior to Moses and even before the time of Abraham.
 2. There is something very special about the blood of an animal, and especially the blood of humans. The ‘life’ is somehow in the blood!
 - a. “But you shall not eat flesh with its life, that is, its blood.” (**Genesis 9:4**, NKJV)
 - b. “For the life of the flesh is in the blood, and I have given it to you upon the altar to make atonement for your souls; for it is the blood that makes atonement for the soul.” (**Leviticus 17:11**, NKJV)
 - c. Perhaps this also has something to do with the *blood of Christ*, which atones for our sins.
 - i. “Then Jesus said to them, “Most assuredly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and *drink His blood*, you have no life in you. Whoever eats My flesh and *drinks My blood* has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day. For My flesh is food indeed, and My blood is drink indeed. He who eats My flesh and drinks My blood abides in Me, and I in him.” (**John 6:53–56**, NKJV)
 1. It should be no wonder that so many of the Jews struggled with this teaching of Jesus!
 - ii. “In the same manner He also took the cup after supper, saying, “This cup is the new covenant in My blood. This do, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of Me.” (**1 Corinthians 11:25**, NKJV)

3. Don't drink blood!
 - a. It seems to me that for spiritual reasons we may not fully understand, Christians should avoid drinking the blood of animals.
 - i. That might include abstaining from eating animals found dead with the blood still in them, such as 'road kill', animals found dead on the highway.
 - ii. That might also include certain cultural dishes that are based on blood (blood pudding, blood sausage, etc.)
 - b. **Question:** What about receiving blood *transfusions* for medical purposes?
 - i. I can appreciate the convictions some have regarding avoiding blood transfusions, based on this command from **Acts 15**.
 - ii. I can't say for sure whether this command applies to that, or if it is simply focused on *eating or drinking* blood.
 - c. Concluding comments:
 - i. Keep the controversy of **Acts 15** in mind when reading Paul's letters, especially Galatians, Ephesians, Colossians, to avoid taking verses out of context.
 1. A classic example is the famous passage in **Ephesians 2:8-9**, where it says we are saved "by grace through faith...not of works...."
 2. If we continue reading in **Ephesians 2** beyond those two well-known verses, we can see that taken in context (reading **Ephesians 3:8-18**) that Paul's concern here with "works" has to do with circumcision and the works of the Law of Moses.
 - a. He is addressing the same issue that the apostles resolved in **Acts 15**.
 - b. Once again, Paul is making the point that the Gentiles do NOT need to be circumcised and do NOT need to follow the works of the Law of Moses in order to be saved.

- ii. We can thank God that we are no longer burdened by the intolerable yoke of the Law of Moses.
 - 1. However, we still need to avoid blood, idolatry, sexual immorality, and things that have been strangled.
 - 2. We also need to keep the commands of Jesus, a good and well-fitted yoke!
- iii. Also, we can add to our spiritual treasury this wonderful new prophecy about the resurrection of Jesus, from **Amos 9**; revealed to us by James.