

THE BOOK OF ACTS

Lesson 34, Chapter 15 continued

As we continue in our study of Acts chapter 15 we'll find ourselves taking a few detours much as we did when studying the Torah. This is necessary to address issues and subjects that are subtly woven into the fabric of Acts 15 so that we extract from this chapter the intended meaning. And no, we won't be finishing Acts 15 today.

I have explained a number of times that the primary issue that created the perceived need for this Jerusalem Council to convene was circumcision (as far as we know, it is the first meeting of its kind for the Messianic Believers). And this arose due to the desire of gentiles, and at the instruction of Christ, that gentiles were to be included in the Yeshua movement. But an almost as significant issue was that the places where gentile Believers met were the same synagogues where the Jewish Believers met. And this created a problem of ritual purity in the minds of many Jews. At the bottom of the ritual purity issue was circumcision. Circumcision and ritual purity are (from the Jewish perspective at least) welded together into a single issue. And that issue is what we see developing in the lead-up to Acts 15. So let's begin today by having a deeper discussion on the matter of circumcision.

From the purely earthly, physical aspect the act of circumcision is a procedure that removes the foreskin from the male reproductive organ. For mature males, it is a painful and highly uncomfortable procedure filled with not just a little anxiety. For many centuries it has been practiced by various ethnic groups and races for all kinds of purposes (some religious, some societal). Thus for many cultures who practice circumcision it is performed on infants; the Bible commanding that it be performed on the 8th day of life. Be aware that in some other of the world's societies it is considered as a rite of passage into adulthood, so around the age of 13-15 male adolescents will have a circumcision procedure. In the Western world some Christian denominations have historically seen it as a religious observance. In other cases it was seen as a beneficial medical procedure to keep males healthier. More recently the medical benefits versus health risks have been challenged, and some nations (especially some European nations) have banned the procedure altogether as they have lately deemed it to be nothing more than a primitive form of mutilation. Of course the reality is that few males in Europe were still having circumcisions anyway; therefore it is blatantly obvious that this new law banning circumcision was aimed directly at the only group who practiced circumcision as a required religious rite: the Jews. In other words it is just another thinly disguised European anti-Semitic attack upon Jews.

The first mention of circumcision is in Genesis chapter 17 and it is directly attached to the Abrahamic Covenant. Let's read this together. Turn to Genesis chapter 17.

READ GENESIS CHAPTER 17:7 – 14

Notice some important features about this covenant that requires circumcision. 1) Circumcision

is the sign, the outward affirmation, of being a participating member of the covenant. This is not a tradition or custom; it is not a manmade device. It is not an option. It is commanded by God. 2) Those that bear this sign represent God's set-apart people as created by the Abrahamic Covenant. Those who refuse the sign also refuse the covenant with its many benefits, and thus they are excluded from God's people. 3) This sign applies not only to Hebrews, but to gentiles who have in one way or another become attached to the Hebrews (in Gen. 17 the attachment is by being a slaveremember that no Hebrew can own a Hebrew slave, so this is specifically referring to foreign gentiles as the slaves). But as time goes on we'll find other ways in the Torah that gentiles could become attached to the Hebrews. 4) While circumcision is not a manmade doctrine, it is performed by men on other men. It is physical, external and fleshly.

However, as with all the signs and devices and rituals that God would give to the Hebrews (especially as He gave them to Moses on Mt. Sinai), these were to be outward symbols of inward spiritual traits and/or they are earthly representations of how things operate in the spiritual realm of Heaven. Moses was told that the Wilderness Tabernacle and its furnishings were modeled after Yehoveh's heavenly throne room, for instance. I characterized this God-principle very early on when we first began to study the Biblical Torah and named it the Reality of Duality. That is, there is generally speaking a spiritual counterpart for most all physical things. And that the spiritual came first, the physical was modeled after it, and so the spiritual would necessarily be more perfect and complete than anything that could be fashioned or accomplished in the physical sphere. Thus everything that is physical is by definition an inferior copy when compared to its spiritual original and counterpart. And, it is the same with the act of circumcision.

Circumcision ought to have been an outward sign of something that occurred deep within the spirits of the Hebrews; that was God's intention. Later the same was to happen with the Torah (the Word of God). While the Torah was presented to humankind (Hebrew humankind) on stone tablets, yet it was written by the spiritual finger of God. And it was intended by God that the Torah would be written on our inward parts.....our spirits. This is not some nice poetic thought coming from your Pastor; this is what Holy Scripture tells us. Turn your Bibles to Deuteronomy chapter 6.

READ DEUTERONOMY 6:1 – 9

So the Lord made it the responsibility of humans....again, **Hebrew** humans.....to write the Laws of Moses onto their own hearts. History shows us that few heeded that commandment, and so we see that very quickly the Hebrew people attempted to perform and obey all the laws and commandments that God gave to them by mechanically following them as one would follow a recipe from a cookbook. But soon they were skipping steps and substituting ingredients because these commands were not written on their hearts, meaning the commandments had not become integrated into their being as part of their human spiritual DNA. So even though they may have been able to perform many of these commandments according to the letter of the law of the Torah, without these commandments being written on their hearts they were NOT able to perform all of them, nor perform them according to the **spirit** of the Law.

Thus the Lord needed a remedy for this failure of faithfulness by His set-apart people. The

remedy would eventually be pronounced in the Book of Jeremiah.

Jeremiah 31:30-33 CJB

³⁰ ***"Here, the days are coming," says ADONAI, "when I will make a new covenant with the house of Isra'el and with the house of Y'hudah.***

³¹ ***It will not be like the covenant I made with their fathers on the day I took them by their hand and brought them out of the land of Egypt; because they, for their part, violated my covenant, even though I, for my part, was a husband to them," says ADONAI.***

³² ***"For this is the covenant I will make with the house of Isra'el after those days," says ADONAI: "I will put my Torah within them and write it on their hearts; I will be their God, and they will be my people.***

³³ ***No longer will any of them teach his fellow community member or his brother, 'Know ADONAI'; for all will know me, from the least of them to the greatest; because I will forgive their wickednesses and remember their sins no more."***

So what did God say was the main feature of this new covenant with Israel and Judah? He said that HE would write the Torah on the hearts of His people. The thing that He ordered the Hebrews to do for themselves in Deuteronomy 6, but which they did not do (to write the Torah upon their own hearts), He has now graciously taken it upon Himself to do it supernaturally. This is a new covenant **about** the Torah; it is not about creating a new and different Torah that replaces the former one.

So the issue the Lord is always pursuing in humanity is for us to follow Him and relate to Him **FIRST** in our hearts (our minds) because it is our hearts that are necessarily the point of connection between His spirit and our spirit. It is the spiritual connection that is most vital. It is the spiritual that drives and controls the physical.

The ancient Sages and Rabbis recognized this fact about not having the Torah written on their hearts, even if over the centuries, when the following of the Law of Moses gave way to following **Halakhah**, and the earthly and physical came to dominate Judaism, the spiritual became almost trivial and the physical rituals and behaviors became everything.

Back in the 18th century Rabbi Schneur Zalman, who lived in Russia, and was the first Rebbe of the Chabad movement within Judaism, wrote a fascinating discourse on the subject of circumcision because he thought that it was at the heart of reforming Judaism. The Chabad movement formed exactly because many Jews felt that Judaism had abandoned its spiritual component, and they wanted to recapture it. He had several marvelous things to say about circumcision, some of which merely reminds us of the rather traditional viewpoint of Judaism, but he also makes points that every Messianic Believer and Christian Bible student ought to pay attention to.

The first thing Rabbi Zalman notes is that circumcision of the heart is related to repentance.

God first said that Hebrews were to circumcise themselves AND to write the Torah on their own hearts; but when they failed, it became necessary for God to do it for them in the form of circumcising the heart. Once the heart was circumcised, then the Torah Law could be carried out to its fullest and in the highest spiritual sense. Why? Because repentance is the key and an uncircumcised heart is not capable of repentance. Without repentance, obedience to God is impossible. And what do we call the lack of obedience to God? Sin. So without an uncircumcised heart, sin will continue to rule over us.

The next thing he says, I shall directly quote to you from one of his letters:

“Besides the physical deed, circumcision reflects a spiritual service. We find two references to this concept in the Torah. One verse⁶ declares, “You shall circumcise the foreskin of your heart.” The second declares,⁷ “The L?rd, your G?d, will circumcise your heart,” i.e. there are two aspects of circumcision: one is performed by man in his striving to elevate himself from below to above. This service necessitates the circumcision of the heart, i.e., the service of repentance as it is written,⁸ “You shall return to the L?rd, your G?d.” This return is expressed through the fulfillment of Torah and its commandments, and will lead to the future redemption, as our Sages declared,⁹ “If the Jewish people turn to G?d in repentance they will be redeemed and if not, they won’t be redeemed.”

So, the good Rebbe says that somehow, sometime, the Lord must do a miraculous work from Heaven, and that work is to circumcise the hearts of His people. This will enable repentance. And the repentance will enable redemption. Doesn't that sound a great deal like the Gospel message: first repentance, then redemption?

Paul took up the theme of circumcision of the heart in contrast with circumcision of the foreskin, and how it relates to Jews versus gentiles, in Romans chapters 2 and 3. Let's read some of that now. Keep in mind what we've learned in Acts up to this point, what the problem is that has caused this council of Believing leadership to convene in Jerusalem (gentile inclusion and the question of circumcision), and what Rebbe Zalman just said about the absolute need for circumcision as the road to repentance, and how repentance is the gateway to redemption.

READ ROMANS CHAPTER 2:17 – 3:4

Here Paul is plainly talking to the Jews in his audience. Next he goes into a speech about what circumcision is and is not. First notice that by definition the term “the circumcised” means Jews. And the term “the uncircumcised” means gentiles. But in Paul's dissertation we have to grant him that the gentiles he is speaking of are God-fearers; they are worshippers of the God of Israel (they aren't pagans). Further, since Paul's concern isn't standard God-fearers but rather specifically gentile Believers in Christ (God-fearers who also believe Yeshua is Messiah), then the contrast and comparison he is drawing is between those who have had a circumcision (and are by any definition Jews) versus those who have not been circumcised (and so by any definition are NOT Jews).

And His argument is that a Jew who claims to know and follow the Torah, but disobeys it, is less acceptable to God than a gentile who doesn't know anything about the Torah but inherently obeys its principles. In fact, won't a gentile (he says) be counted by God as a TRUE Jew because he obeys the Torah principles? But a Jew who disobeys the Torah will be counted by God as though he is a gentile (meaning that from the spiritual aspect he is set outside of the set-apart people). And, says Paul, that is because God counts as Jews those who have circumcised hearts and not only circumcised foreskins.

Then moving on to Romans 3, just so his listeners don't confuse the ideal-spiritual with the earthly-physical, Paul makes it clear that Jews and gentiles don't actually trade places or trade-in their Jewish bodies for gentile bodies or vice versa. And gentiles don't gain Jewish national citizenship because they have a circumcised heart; nothing physically changes because of a circumcised heart. Jews stay Jews, and gentiles stay gentiles, and in fact Jews continue to hold their preeminent place because God gave the Jews (the Hebrews, actually) His written word (the Torah). So the conclusion is that the matter of circumcision comes down to a spiritual issue of the heart when it comes to a relationship with God; when it comes to repentance; and (in this context) when it comes to redemption (salvation). Please notice that this entire matter of a circumcised heart was already understood in Judaism; it was not a new concept. It was understood by many of the deep Jewish thinkers that a circumcised heart was needed for repentance and then repentance was needed for redemption. Rather Paul was merely applying this principle to the issue of where gentile God-fearers (or better, gentile Believers in Yeshua) stood in relation to the Jewish people and to God.

But never miss this point: circumcision is all about the Abrahamic Covenant. And redemption, especially concerning salvation in Christ, comes out of the Abrahamic Covenant. Further, circumcision of the heart is the ONLY means by which a gentile can join in the spiritual benefits of the Abrahamic Covenant. And who circumcises the heart? God. But it goes no further than the **spiritual** benefits. A Jew who is circumcised of the foreskin is the means by which he can join in the physical, earthly benefits of the Abrahamic Covenant (he may be part of the physical, earthly covenant people, the Hebrews, and he may also be a joint inheritor of the land that God gave to Abraham); but it goes no further. Rather Jews must also have circumcised hearts as the ONLY means to join the spiritual benefits of the Abrahamic Covenant. And what are the SPIRITUAL benefits for both Jews and gentiles? Forgiveness of sins (even sins that the Torah of Moses and the sacrificial system can't atone for) and eternal life with God (that up to now had never been available). And all this is provided by that special seed of Abraham that the Abrahamic Covenant promised would indeed bless all the families of all the peoples on earth. And who is that seed of Abraham? **Yeshua HaMashiach**.

And that my friends is why circumcision is such an important topic, a complex topic, in both the Old and New Testaments; it is why it is such a significant topic for the Jerusalem Council; and it is why Paul goes into an elaborate explanation (more than once) about what circumcision actually is from both the physical and the spiritual aspects, what it means, and how central to repentance and redemption it is. And every bit of what we just learned is spelled out in God's Word. But how would we ever know if we never seriously studied the Torah and the Old Testament or trusted in its continuing relevance? We could accept this truth as a Church doctrine, simply because the Church authorities tell us so and we have elected to submit to

their knowledge and authority. But isn't it better to actually see it develop for ourselves? To find it clearly pronounced in God's Word, and not merely written as a short bumper sticker doctrine on a Church program?

With that understanding in mind, let's continue on now with our study of Acts chapter 15.

RE-READ ACTS CHAPTER 15:12 – 21

Let's remember that Barnabas and Paul, who have targeted the gentiles for evangelism, are speaking before a group of leaders of The Way who are Jerusalem based. So Barnabas and Paul have their main experience in spreading the Good News with the gentile community; but they are the exception. Peter sides with them as well (to a point) because Peter has taken the Gospel to both Jews and gentiles, and he had the amazing experience of his vision of the cloth descending from Heaven with animals in it, whereby he learned that God considers the gentiles to be clean, and not inherently defiled. So it is with respect and admiration that we read that the council remained quiet as Paul and Barnabas had their say on what were emotionally charged and hotly contentious theological issues of circumcision and gentile inclusion. Paul related the many miraculous things that God did among the gentiles as proof that the Lord approved and was leading the way to bring the gentiles on board.

Once Paul and Barnabas have concluded their report the supreme leader of The Way, James, Yeshua's half-brother, stands and addresses the Council. He begins by referring to what "**Shimon**" spoke about regarding the gentiles. **Shimon** is referring to Peter (called Simon Peter at times). And essentially what James is doing is going over the evidence presented and in doing so explains why he is going to rule on the matter the way that he will. This is the classic way that rabbinic councils regularly met to discuss matters of **Halakhah** (Jewish Law), and it is also how the chief Rabbi issues his final ruling. It would naturally go this way because the Council saw itself as existing and operating fully within the context of a council of authoritative elders making a ruling of **Halakhah** that would govern their specific sect of Judaism.

So James says that one of the strongest pieces of evidence in this case was presented by Peter. James' key words to help us understand his position on the matter begin verse 14: "**Shimon** (Peter) has told us in detail **what God did.....**" So for James the issue resolves itself because it is clear that God directly intervened with Peter and Cornelius and God stated what His will is on the matter. This was not hearsay, then; this wasn't even an issue of Scripture interpretation. God stated to Peter that gentiles were not unclean. And after some time of contemplating what Yehoveh's decision meant in the larger picture, Peter came to the conclusion that we read back in Acts 10:34, which he has relayed to the leadership of The Way.

Acts 10:34-35 CJB

³⁴ Then Kefa addressed them: "I now understand that God does not play favorites, ³⁵ but that whoever fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him, no matter what people he belongs to.

So now James connects prophecy with what Paul, Barnabas and Peter have experienced and reported on to the Council (their successful evangelizing of gentiles) as he quotes from Amos 9. And he says that what the Prophets have said about the inclusion of gentiles into God's Kingdom was predicted and so it is coming to pass..... right now.

Let's detour again for just a moment. James' own brother was Messiah Yeshua; and how terribly difficult that must have been for him to accept. It is very hard to have a familial relationship or even a friendship relationship with someone in which over an extended period of time you see one another as peers and equals, only to have one of you suddenly elevated in authority and status or even accomplishment well above yourself and others. Countless novels have been written about the broken relationships, envy, hatred, even revenge that sometimes comes from such things. But at the same time, when James was finally able to come to acceptance and submission to the truth of his own brother as not only the deliverer of Israel, the *mashiach*, but also as divine (can you imagine such a thing in your own family?), it made James sensitive and moldable, enabling him to view Biblical prophesy in real, tangible terms (not just theory) and apply it to current events. That is something that most Jews simply could not bring themselves to do (not even the intellectual elite), and it shows up especially in the vast bulk of the Jewish people refusing to connect the prophecies about a coming Messiah to Yeshua; so they missed it entirely and the Jewish people suffer from it to this day.

But because of Messiah's advent and all that came with it, James as well as the leadership of The Way were on the look-out for just this very thing; prophecy that was being fulfilled right before their eyes. They were **expecting** more prophecy to come about and they wanted to recognize it. I attempt to occasionally intertwine prophecy into our lessons in order that we understand that we are living in an age of prophetic fulfillment the likes of which has not been seen on this planet since the close of the New Testament. Essentially, all prophetic fulfillments ended with the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 A.D. and from then forward went into hibernation until it exploded back into action upon the re-birth of the nation of Israel in 1948. In fact, within Christianity, those almost 1900 dormant years caused trust in Biblical prophecy to turn into skepticism; and that skepticism overflowed into the commentaries and doctrines that underpin the mainstream Christian denominations as we know them in our time. So while End Times prophecies about the Tribulation and Armageddon are all the rage, they tend to be mostly Western gentile Christian focused and wherever Israel and the Jewish people are spoken of in these prophecies, much of Christianity scratches out the word Israel and inserts the word "Church". Thus the happenings today with Israel, the migration of members of the 10 Lost Tribes back to Israel, the persecution of the nations upon Israel, the battle for Jerusalem, the rise of Islam and more are regularly overlooked as not connecting with the prophecies that obviously speak of these very events...at least to those who have eyes to see and ears to hear.

But the Jerusalem Council was indeed looking at everything that was happening and comparing it, eyes wide open, to Scriptural prophecies to see if it appropriately fit. And when it did, they accepted it even if they didn't fully understand it, and even if it didn't necessarily sit well with them. The inclusion of gentiles was not something that most Jews, or even most of the disciples, particularly welcomed. Rather the Jews were looking for vindication of their status as God's set-apart people. They were not looking for God's grace to be poured out upon the very people that were oppressing them.

This prophecy of Amos that James quotes speaks of rebuilding the fallen tent of David. It was the coming of Yeshua, a royal descendant of David, who rebuilt David's legacy and his fallen tent. But as a result, says Amos' prophecy, the rest of mankind (non-Hebrews) will seek the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, and the gentiles will accept God's offer. So James sees what is happening with Peter, Paul and Barnabas as the fulfillment of Amos 9.

Therefore for James the question now becomes: what do we do about it? How does the Council mold the ***Halakhah*** of The Way in such a manner as to remove any barriers or impediments to God's prophetic will playing out with the gentiles? That is what we'll cover next week.