

THE BOOK OF ACTS

Lesson 36, Chapter 15 continued 3

Last time we looked closely at Acts chapter 15 verse 20, where the supreme leader of The Way, Yeshua's brother James, says this referring to the new gentile Believers living in Antioch:

Acts 15:20 CJB ²⁰ *Instead, we should write them a letter telling them to abstain from things polluted by idols, from fornication, from what is strangled and from blood.*

This statement was part of a momentous decision by the Jerusalem Council to not require circumcision of gentiles who want to worship Yeshua as Savior and God. Essentially this meant that they could remain as gentiles and not convert to Jews. We also learned that far from some newly concocted set of rules for Christians, this list of 4 prohibitions was taken directly from the Law of Moses, which we traced to Leviticus chapters 17 and 18. But even more, the concept of gentile proselytes at first not being expected to follow the entire Jewish **Halakhah**, nor even the part of **Halakhah** that was the Law of Moses, was already well understood within Judaism as evidenced by recorded case law in the Talmud. Rather, the concept was that the new gentile Believers would be given a few basic commandments to obey (the most fundamental ones that were directly related to ritual purity), and over time as they grew and matured in the faith they would be taught the Torah in synagogues and more would be required of them; but each at his or her own pace. So the point of requiring immediate implementation of those 4 rules was this: without keeping ritually clean, the gentile Believers couldn't enter into a synagogue or have table fellowship with Jews.

Is this not a most wise approach even if we don't see such a method necessarily given to us in the Scriptures as a direct commandment? Modern day Christians and Messianics need to take note of this as we evangelize and mentor new Believers. People who have only recently come to know the Lord are like toddlers who have only recently learned to walk and talk. It would be foolish, if not unkind, to next expect them to quickly graduate to marathons and give eloquent speeches or elaborate explanations of their faith. Or better, to expect their behavior to change overnight to something that meets our standard of godliness. Rather they must be embraced, given some basic instructions to follow, and then fed a steady diet of God's Word. As they grow in God's Word they can be gradually encouraged to follow more of God's commandments fully and with more consistency. This does not mean that their sin is excused or papered-over; but it may mean that sins due mostly to an ignorance of God's ways are explained in a merciful and loving manner rather than the new Believer being condemned for his or her trespasses. It is really no different than how we raise children; we don't expect kindergarteners to behave like high school students. Maturing is a long process that takes nurturing, time and patience.

Let's re-read Acts 15 starting in verse 22.

RE-READ ACTS CHAPTER 15:22 – end

Once the leadership council had made their decision and decided on a course of action, the next step was to communicate it to the Antioch congregation; this was customarily accomplished by sending an official written letter. So the leadership announced their decision to the local Messianic Jews in Jerusalem, and together they recommended some men to go to Antioch and deliver the letter. They sent a fellow named **Y'hudah** (Judah) also called **Bar-Sabba** and also another man named **Sila**; Judah was this person's Hebrew name, while Bar-Sabba was his Aramaic name. These men were not part of The Way's leadership council but they probably were more or less the first rung of leadership on the leadership ladder. Why did they elect to send men from Jerusalem to go with Paul and Barnabas? Because they wanted to authenticate that this edict came directly from the leadership council. After all; what precipitated this council meeting in the first place was that a self-appointed group of Believers who firmly believed that gentiles had to be circumcised and thus converted to Jews, went out from Jerusalem to Antioch implying that what they demanded was a doctrine subscribed to by the Jerusalem leadership of The Way. Since this letter was a reversal of that doctrine, then the Jerusalem Council must have felt that the strongest possible proof of authenticity was needed.

Let's talk for a minute about the first of the 4 prohibitions for the gentile Believers. The words are: to abstain from "things" polluted by idols (or in the letter it says "sacrificed to" idols). This is usually taken to pertain to food; but food isn't the only thing that was offered to idols. Everything from family pets, to clothing, to wine, to jewelry and charms were offered to pagan idols. So this rule is rather all encompassing. That said, food was perhaps at the top of the list as concerned ritual purity for Jews so at the least this instruction included food and likely was zeroing in on food items that had been offered to idols. Nonetheless, underlying this rule is the issue of idolatry and idol worship was the mainstay of all pagan religions.

As we discussed last time, the rule against fornication is used in the sense to mean any kind of immoral sexual activity (immoral according to the Torah of course). Let that sink in for a moment when we think about James establishing 4 rules, but according to Christian doctrine he was also abrogating the remainder of the commandments of the Torah for gentile Believers. There are many laws in the Torah that when used together define immoral or illicit sexual activity; there is not just one. God is careful in His Word to define these terms but you have to search the Torah from Genesis through Deuteronomy to pull out and list all of God's rules about human sexual activity. So by whose standard of sexual morality did James intend that gentile Christians were to go by when determining what is lawful and what is not for them? How does a person define what fornication is and what it is not? According to what set of law codes? Roman law codes? Of course not; Believers are to go by God's law code and that is found in the Torah. So while this rule about fornication might seem like only 1 simple commandment, in fact it necessarily incorporates several laws of Moses.

The rule against strangling a food animal is similar; it may sound like only 1 simple rule, but there are several laws of Moses that deal with how to kill food animals for the sake of ritual purity. There are also the aspects of killing food animals that deals with being humane to God's creatures. So once again, while we see one general rule about killing a food animal in fact the standard for this one rule is contained by aggregating a number of the laws of Moses,

which is of course what these new Believers would have been expected to abide by.

So what we see is that the 1st rule and the 3rd rule are mostly aimed at food. It breaks God's food laws to eat an animal that was offered to an idol (that is, to a false god). It also breaks God's food laws to strangle a food animal to death before eating it. And then finally there is the 4th rule, and it too at least partially applies to food. That 4th rule says to abstain from blood. So 3 of the 4 rules applies to what makes food kosher; and what makes food kosher is all about its ritual purity, at least beyond what God says is permitted versus prohibited items to eat in the first place. I'll say it again: 3 of the 4 rules set down in Acts 15 for gentile Christians to obey are related to food and diet. And all these rules are derived directly from the Torah. Interesting; I thought the Christian doctrine was that all kosher food laws were done away with, at least for gentile Christians? But here are 3 standard kosher food laws that gentile Christians are told that they must obey, says the Jerusalem Council.

But that is not all that the issue of blood deals with. "Blood" is a sort-of Jewish shorthand that deals with several issues. Whether animal or human, blood is sacred. The spilling of human blood has to be dealt with in a certain way or it is against God's Torah, just as the spilling and use of animal blood has to be dealt with in a certain way or it is against God's Torah. Different commentators will argue that the prohibition against blood in Acts 15 is speaking only of murder, or it is speaking only about blood as relates to food; still other commentators say it is covering both. No doubt this rule in Acts 15 is ambiguous in its scope. What we can know for sure, however, is that the sentence is constructed in a way such that the prohibition against blood is directly connected to animals that are strangled (such that the blood from the animal is not drained from it); however that doesn't necessarily mean that it doesn't also include homicide and other matters of human blood. So my opinion is that it is certain that it refers to how food animals must be slaughtered and then the treatment thereafter of the animal blood (such as not using the blood as food); but it is likely that it also intends to extend to the laws concerning the spilling of human blood. And this rule against blood is encompassed by numerous Torah laws that call out what murder versus manslaughter is; what unjustified versus justified killing of a human is; even down to the matter of menstrual blood and blood that is spilled during child birth. So the issue of blood is quite broad and is defined by several separate laws and commandments in the Torah, some involving food, some involving humane treatment of animals, and others still that deal with homicide.

The bottom line is that these 4 laws that James pronounced are in fact but the naming of categories that include dozens of laws in the Torah. Not only are these categories derived from the Torah, but without the Torah definitions and instructions we have no standard for even knowing what these 4 laws mean or how to apply them. So it is quite ingenuous for commentators to claim that by James establishing these 4 rules that he has effectively replaced and abolished the Law of Moses for gentiles.

The heading of the letter to the gentile Believers begins in verse 23 and it opens by saying that the leadership of The Way (sometimes they are called the emissaries, which is a designation for the original 12 disciples), and some other leaders called the elders, are the authorized writers of the letter and that they consider themselves as "brothers" to the gentile Believers. This is meant in a warm and friendly way to indicate a close relationship; not that suddenly

these gentile Believers share a gene pool with the Jewish leadership as a result of all involved having received the Holy Spirit.

And they begin their letter by distancing themselves from their fellow Jewish Believers who went to Antioch without proper authority and telling the gentiles that they had to be circumcised. The important point is that it is specifically stated here that indeed the Circumcision faction went out from this group of Believers and members of The Way; and that we learn that some of them were Pharisees doesn't alter that fact (Paul was also a Pharisee). Thus in Galatians 2, when Paul says in verse 4 that these men of the Circumcision faction are "pretenders", we need to understand that Paul is being typically Paul; he uses a harsh tone with his choice of terms. But we also need to realize that while he seems to question these men's faith because of their belief in circumcision for gentiles, James the leader of The Way obviously doesn't question their faith; he just doesn't agree with their doctrine about circumcising gentiles. And the letter also confirms that the men who are delivering the letter are fully authorized to do so.

Then verse 28 essentially tells the gentiles what we already know; that the first 4 things that are immediately required of them are abstaining from things sacrificed to idols, blood, strangling animals and sexual immorality. When we carefully read this passage we find that not one word is said to directly refute the claim of the Circumcision faction that gentiles must be circumcised in order to worship Yeshua; the subject of circumcision is not even mentioned. Rather the issue of circumcision is only implied by saying that if the gentiles will obey these 4 prohibitions that they will be doing the right thing. This is where things have, in my opinion, taken a strange and unwarranted turn in Christianity. I can recall telling my teenage sons that going to school and getting good grades is what they should focus on because it would form the basis for so much of their future. So to put that thought in the vernacular of this letter to the gentiles, if my sons would go to school, study hard and get good grades, then they would be doing the right thing. Does that sound to you like I meant that all other house rules or requirements for their lives are hereby abolished and the only requirement I have for them is to go to school and get good grades? Or that all boundaries and limits for them are hereby erased as long as they go to school and get good grades? I can promise you that they didn't take it to mean that. They still had to be obedient, they still had to be home at the time given to them, they still had to bathe, they still had to clean their rooms, etc. The point is this: does this instruction actually imply that the gentiles should abide ONLY by these 4 things and to permanently ignore all else? Does it say or imply that nothing else matters for gentiles, or that everything else has been nullified for gentiles? No it doesn't; it just says that if the gentile Believers will do these 4 things they will be doing well in the sense that the gentiles will be on the right track. That these 4 rules are the alpha and omega of everything that a gentile Believer (a Christian) should or should not do from now on is in no way implied here; but that meaning has been erroneously read into the passage by Christianity for many centuries in order for Christians to separate themselves from Jews and from the Old Testament.

I pray that you are seeing that on every level it is illogical to take this letter in Acts 15 to the extreme that Christians now have only 4 new rules to follow, and thus the Law of Moses has been abolished by James, brother of Christ. For one thing, without knowing the Law of Moses we don't even know what these 4 rules mean or how to carry them out. And if the Law of

Moses is abolished, these 4 rules are necessarily abolished right along with it (as well as the 10 Commandments, for that matter). And by the way, there is something I want to alert you to that is most pertinent to us in our day and time. Due to the rapidly increasing influence of Islam in the West, it is now common to find meats in our markets and at restaurants that are clearly labeled as “halal”. A good Muslim will not eat meat unless they are certain that it is halal. Halal is essentially the Islamic version of Kosher. The issue is this: part of what makes meat halal for Muslims is that during the meat processing it has to be dedicated to Allah. Specifically during the process, a Muslim religious authority will recite a prayer over the meat; this prayer of dedication to Allah is called the tasmiya or shahada. I hope that unnerves you because since Allah is a false god, then doesn't that seem to be at the heart of the matter of the Acts 15 rule against eating things dedicated to idols, since idols are nothing but depictions of false gods? Until recently, we've not had to be concerned about eating meat dedicated to idols (something that Christianity has long seen as an irrelevant relic). But up pops Islam, along with a movement of tolerance to appease their religion, and suddenly this rule becomes quite pertinent to us again. Let me state this clearly; if you eat halal approved meat, you are eating meat that has been dedicated to an idol...to a false god....Allah. I strongly advise you against it.

The story of Acts 15 winds down quickly; we are told that the 2 envoys Judah and Sila accompanied Paul and Barnabas back to Antioch, a congregation meeting was convened, and the letter read to them. The people, we are told, were delighted with its encouragement. No doubt the term “the people” meant both Jews and gentiles because this ruling solved issues for both groups. It meant that adult gentile males did not have to go through the grueling experience of circumcision, and it meant that they did not have to disavow their gentile identity and become Jews, which could have far reaching effect on their families, friends, and businesses. For the Jews it was clear that their religious authorities, the Jerusalem Council, decided that if the gentiles would obey those 4 rules then the issue of ritual purity was overcome, and so the Jews no longer risked defilement by associating with these gentile Believers.

We're told that Judah and Sila were prophets and so they said much to encourage and strengthen the brethren. The term prophet as used here doesn't mean someone who could predict the future, and it doesn't mean a man that God called to deliver a new oracle. By now the term had evolved such that it mostly meant a person who taught God's written word. Prophets were usually itinerant preachers, if you would, and considered as among the most authoritative, knowledgeable and wise when it came to discerning the Holy Scriptures; so they were welcomed and honored.

In time Judah and Sila left to go home to Jerusalem, but Paul and Barnabas remained in Antioch. These 2 disciples have created quite a bond with the synagogue in Antioch, and we can see their allegiance to the people there on display. But after a little more time passed, Paul suggested to Barnabas that it would be good if they went and visited the other congregations of Believers that they had set up in a number of towns. Barnabas wanted to include his relative John Mark in the mission trip. It is pretty clear that the leadership in Jerusalem was not controlling Paul and Barnabas' ministry; rather Paul and Barnabas decided in concert with the Antioch congregation what they would do. It would be too strong to characterize this as a split; but at the same time it is clear that in Jerusalem the Believers' main concern is the Jews,

while Paul's main concern is the gentiles. How one went about preaching the Gospel, making new Believers, discipling and mentoring them, would necessarily be different depending on if you were witnessing to gentiles or to Jews. And it would also be different depending on if the Jews lived in the Holy Land or in some foreign land. So there were disagreements in doctrine and we need to take that into account as we read Paul's Epistles. Paul is always coming from a certain perspective due to his mission and agenda, and it wasn't always the same perspective as Peter's or James's. And when we hold their writings up to comparisons on common issues, we'll see subtle but important differences.

I want to pause for just a moment to make a point about evangelizing. It is one thing to bring the Good News to our gentile friends and neighbors in America, and it is another to bring that same Good News to Jews in Israel. And, yes, depending on the circumstances there can also be a 3rd variable when bringing the Good News to Jews in America. To take different approaches, using different people, to evangelize these different groups is not only wise it is Biblical as we see here in Acts.

Many years ago, after several trips to Israel, I began to understand why the success rate of Christians coming to Israel to spread the Gospel was so poor. It was because most Jews in Israel don't want to hear much of anything from a Christian, and it is very hard for comfortable and structured Americans to relate to the never ending turmoil and chaos of Jewish Israel. The Israelis also see Christian naivety in believing that we can take our American gentile methods and assume that we can just transplant them to Israel. There are other reasons as well for failure that is certainly not all the missionaries' fault, but rather also results from the closed ears of those to whom the message is being brought. But the point is that there is no one-size-fits-all method for spreading the Gospel. And the extent to which certain doctrines are exercised and how they are followed also necessarily varies depending on your audience, their culture, and present circumstances.

I realized that the only way that would bring true success in taking the Good News to the Jews of Israel was if Believing Israeli Jews were the ones doing the evangelizing. It also must be done in the language of Israel: Hebrew. Adding those two elements break down many barriers for which gentile Christians have no means to attack so the list of those who can do this task effectively is quite narrow. For example I personally know a few American missionaries who have lived in Israel for years and years; and they have learned little to no Hebrew. And they live in neighborhoods where other Americans live so that they feel more comfortable, English is spoken, and there are stores that accommodate their Western tastes. What do you think that says to the people of Israel? Does that say I'm one you, and I'm in solidarity with you? Or does it say not only am I not one of you, but I don't find it worth my while to learn to speak your language or live under the same conditions as you live. But, thanks be to God, Seed of Abraham Ministries has 2 ministries in Israel, completely staffed by Believing Jews most of whom were either born in Israel or immigrated to Israel, and all who speak Hebrew. They are having good success in establishing relationships and in demonstrating the love and care that comes with knowing Yeshua as Savior. They are also rehabilitating a very tarnished reputation that Christians have created over the centuries in dealings with Jews. But their approach wouldn't be very recognizable in America, and probably wouldn't be very effective for taking the Gospel to American gentiles. But even more, it is quite culturally specific and so our staff

does things that many Churches simply would not approve of.

And I will tell you honestly that because of these cultural differences there is always a bit of underlying tension present because dealing with Israeli Jews is so different than dealing with American gentiles. While it is immensely gratifying that Seed of Abraham is so diverse, yet cohesive, in our goals, it is also no easy trick to keep these various parts operating within different cultures, with the proper level of co-operation that is needed, and teaching the proper doctrine. It is necessary to give the 2 missions in Israel as much freedom as possible to operate within their unique culture, allowing them to choose how best to achieve their goal of bringing Yeshua back to Israel, and not to burden them with ways and thoughts that seem so normal and ordinary here, but are foreign and at times counter-productive over there.

I tell you this to better help you understand the philosophy and goals of Seed of Abraham Ministries, but also to offer a good modern day metaphor for what we see happening at this juncture in Acts 15. There are indeed underlying tensions between Paul in Antioch and those Believing Jews who operate out of Jerusalem and have James and Peter as their leaders. And now we see that there is an underlying tension between Paul and Barnabas over family issues. This doesn't mean that someone is right, so the other must be wrong. It is just the typical social dynamics of humanity at work; and being a Believer in Yeshua.....even an Apostle....doesn't immunize us from having these challenges.

Barnabas wants his nephew John Mark to come with them; Paul doesn't because he doesn't feel he can count on him since on their last missionary journey John Mark abandoned them (at least that's how Paul spoke about it). Frankly, I'm not entirely certain that John Mark is a Believer; nothing explicitly says he is. Rather his mother is a Believer, and his uncle Barnabas is as well, but one isn't a Believer merely through association. It's like a friend said the other day: sleeping in the garage doesn't make you a car. Paul is a stickler for loyalty and for pretty rigid adherence to doctrines he thinks are right. No doubt this is largely the result of his Pharisee background, but I think it is also partly due to his inherent personality. Paul is all business, and it seems John Mark isn't. So Paul and Barnabas part company, with Barnabas and John Mark taking a ship to Cyprus.

It was customary for the disciples to travel in pairs, so with Barnabas out of the picture, Paul asks Sila to join him. They departed for Syria and Cilicia where Paul had established Believing congregations. Back in verse 33 we're told that Sila and Judah returned home from Antioch, so apparently Paul sent word to Jerusalem and asked Sila if he would join him. The wording of verse 40 suggests that Paul left Antioch alone, and must have met up with Sila somewhere along the journey.

Paul left armed with an important new doctrine to use as he sought to make new Believers of the gentiles, especially. It was that they didn't need to convert to being a Jew to accept the Gospel message. Paul no doubt also had to convince the Jews that if the gentiles would abstain from things sacrificed to idols, from sexual immorality, from strangling food animals to death and from blood, an official Halakhic ruling made in Jerusalem said that these gentiles would be ritually clean. This was critical for rapid growth in the number of gentiles that would join the movement.

While the circumstances of Paul and Barnabas's split are nothing righteous or edifying, the end result was that instead of a single team of Paul and Barnabas going out, now two teams began plowing the fertile ground of the gentile world. While this dispute that was serious enough to break up the very effective team of Paul and Barnabas is somewhat uncomfortable for us to read about (we want to think better of our faith fathers), it reminds us that they are not special or different; they're just human. Whatever set them apart from others was their God, not their merit. Yet, God used their acrimonious parting for good, and each team went on to win many souls for the Kingdom of Heaven.

We will begin Acts chapter 16 next time.