

### THE BOOK OF ACTS

#### Lesson 37, Chapter 16

Today we will study Acts chapter 16, which is often called Paul's 2<sup>nd</sup> missionary journey. Before we do, I want to take just a short time to sum up what we learned from Acts 15 as it will significantly affect the taking of the Gospel to gentiles.

Acts 15 revolved around the so-called Jerusalem Council, which was a meeting of the leadership of The Way in their headquarters, Jerusalem. The subject of the meeting was circumcision as regards the many new gentile Believers, almost all of whom resided outside the Holy Land in the many provinces and nations that formed the far flung Roman Empire. The question put before the Council was this: should gentile followers of Messiah Yeshua be required to become Jews? It was the act of circumcision of the foreskin for males that marked a person as abandoning their gentile identity and instead taking on a new Jewish identity. This operation in the flesh was anything but an idealistic show of sympathy or solidarity with the Jewish people. A person who was circumcised literally, tangibly, and legally became a Jew, no different than a Jew who was born as a Jew and had always lived as a Jew.

Ancient and modern Christian commentaries regularly discuss circumcision of gentiles as Judaizing. And invariably the perspective is that what a gentile Believer is doing by being circumcised is that he is buying into a worthless Jewish ritual that represents being obedient to Jewish Law. So essentially there is an unholy mixture being formed between Christianity and Judaism. I hope you can see by now that this was not the issue, meaning or intent for circumcising gentiles; rather it was to convert these Believing gentiles to full-fledged Jews (or better, to Jewish Believers).

Why did so many Jewish Believers think that gentile Believers ought to be circumcised? First was that it seemed self-evident to them that the Yeshua movement that spawned The Way was nothing more nor less than a new sect of Judaism. The founder of the movement was a Holy Land Jew: Jesus of Nazareth. The only thing that gave this particular sect of Judaism its peculiar identity that made it different from the other sects of Judaism was their belief that Yeshua of Nazareth was the long awaited Messiah. All other commonly practiced elements of Judaism that tended to be recognized regardless of which Jewish faction one might belong to, members of The Way also practiced. We don't have to speculate if this is true; we read of this in Acts chapter 21.

#### Acts 21:18-20 CJB

***<sup>18</sup> The next day Sha'ul and the rest of us went in to Ya'akov, and all the elders were present.***

***<sup>19</sup> After greeting them, Sha'ul described in detail each of the things God had done among the Gentiles through his efforts.***

<sup>20</sup> ***On hearing it, they praised God; but they also said to him, "You see, brother, how many tens of thousands of believers there are among the Judeans, and they are all zealots for the Torah.***

When the term "the Torah" is used in verse 20 in our Complete Jewish Bible, the Greek word is **nomos** and it is more literally translated as "law" and usually written as "Law" in English Bibles. So the sense of the meaning here probably mostly points towards **Halakhah** (that indeed includes the Law of Moses), or as it is more popularly known, Rabbinic or Jewish Law. The point is that the Jewish Believers (especially those living in the Holy Lands) kept right on being Jewish and observing all the same customs, traditions, and Biblical Laws of Moses as they always had.

So the idea was that if a person wanted to be part of this new sect of Judaism of course they would have to be Jewish. Thus a non-Jew must be circumcised in order to become a Jew.

The second reason that Jewish Believers thought gentiles ought to be circumcised was because gentiles created ritual purity issues for Jews. Even though Peter learned in a direct revelation from the Lord in Acts 10 that God did not consider gentiles as inherently unclean, nonetheless because gentiles obviously didn't observe the Torah laws that defined proper ritual purity (and what to do if one became defiled), then the practical matter of Jews associating with Believing gentiles had to be dealt with. Since gentile Believers went to (or at least wanted to go to) Jewish synagogues, then these gentiles put the Jewish congregation members at risk of becoming ritually unclean. So the solution was painfully obvious (pun intended): circumcise these adult Believing gentiles and make them Jews! Problem solved. Yet, Peter's vision and the Holy Spirit visibly falling upon the gentile Cornelius and his household made it clear that from God's perspective gentiles didn't need to be turned into Jews to worship Messiah Yeshua. Fine; but if not circumcision then what else could be done to solve the ritual purity issue? The result was that 4 rules (all prohibitions) were to be immediately required for gentile Believers: they must not involve themselves with things sacrificed to idols (mainly this applied to food), and they must not commit any sort of immoral sex sin (fornication), and they must not strangle food animals to death, and they must observe the Torah laws concerning blood. In reality each one of these 4 "rules" represented a category of behaviors (as defined in the Law of Moses) such that if gentile Believers scrupulously obeyed them (just as their Jewish counterparts were already doing), then they would be seen as ritually clean and able to attend synagogue meetings and have table fellowship with Jewish Believers.

We learned that every one of these 4 rules was taken directly from the Law of Moses; and that all of them involved food in one way or another. We also learned that nothing contained in the decree issued by the Jerusalem Council said, or implied, that gentiles had no other obligations than these 4 rules or that the Law had been set aside for gentile Believers. Rather, as stated in Acts 15: <sup>21</sup> ***For from the earliest times, Moshe has had in every city those who proclaim him, with his words being read in the synagogues every Shabbat.***" So the idea was that the 4 rules was the beginning point for gentile Believers: it was the entry exam. **If** they followed these 4 rules, **then** they could attend synagogues. And it was in synagogues where they would learn the Law of Moses from the Jewish synagogue teachers and over time these gentiles

would gain the knowledge and discipline to know and obey more and more of the Biblical Law.

So now a huge problem has been solved: gentile Believers could remain gentiles, and they could attend Jewish synagogues **if** they followed the dictum of the Jerusalem Council (which, by the way, was not so simple and easy as it appears on the surface to modern day Christians). But it was also great news for the Jewish Believers who now didn't have to be concerned that they were going to be ritually defiled by these sincere, but possibly unclean, gentiles. Now armed with this decision, Paul had the needed basis to begin his second missionary journey knowing that he had official sanction to declare to the gentiles that there was no requirement for them to be circumcised and thus become Jews in order to be saved by Yeshua or to worship and fellowship at synagogues. But please note something else: there was also no suggestion or hint that if a gentile **WANTED** to be circumcised and become a Jew and worship Christ that he should not (it was a matter of personal choice). However (as a principle) from the aspect of standing with God and with salvation in His Son Yeshua, to be circumcised offered no additional benefit for a gentile. So if a gentile's motive for circumcision was to somehow achieve extra merit, then to be circumcised for that reason was wrong-minded.

Let's move on to Acts chapter 16. I want you to watch for a subtle, but interesting, twist in these passages. I told you way back in our Introduction to Acts that we would eventually run into what scholars call "the we passages". That is, almost every paragraph in Acts is told from the perspective of the author reporting that a certain Bible character did thus and so. This was marked by saying that "they" did this, or "he" said that and so on. But there are places when the author of Acts (who is Luke) says "we" and "us", obviously including himself in the action. In other words, while Luke writes the Book of Acts mostly using the testimony of witnesses and borrowing from source documents created by others, there are a few times when Luke was actually present when certain things took place. So we know, as here in Acts 16, that Luke was not only personally acquainted with Paul, but he actually accompanied Paul on some of his adventures. We find such an instance here in chapter 16, at verse 10.

### **READ ACTS CHAPTER 16 all**

Verse 1 introduces Timothy who will, 150 years later, have 2 Bible books named for him. Paul ventured, apparently by himself, from Antioch of Syria to Derbe and Lystra; there he met up with Timothy. And by the way, since I read from the CJB, older versions of the CJB had a misprint and left out the word Derbe; newer editions have corrected it. The Bible text is not clear in which of Derbe or Lystra that Timothy resided; nor is it clear if Paul knew of Timothy before he left Antioch, or only learned of Timothy once he arrived in the Derbe/Lystra region. We learn very little about Timothy in Acts 16 except that his mother was a Jewish Believer and his father was a pagan gentile. We don't know if Timothy's father was dead or alive as he plays no role in the story; and frankly it is not even certain that his parents were married. However we do know that Timothy was a disciple of Christ.

The Book of 2Timothy chapter 1 tells us a little more information about him; his mother's name is Eunice and his grandmother is Lois; both are Believers. It is generally speculated that both of these women came to belief in Yeshua at the time of Paul's 1<sup>st</sup> missionary journey to Derbe

and Lystra. I agree as that makes sense because when else might they have had an opportunity to hear the Gospel other than from Paul? What is super important not just for this story, but for the Books of 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Timothy, is that Timothy's mother was a Jew; and I'll show you why that is important.

Verse 2 explains that the Believing Jews in Lystra and Iconium spoke glowingly about Timothy, so Paul wanted Timothy to come with him on the remainder of his journey. But before that was confirmed Paul insisted that Timothy get circumcised. And the passage says that he did that "because of the Jews living in that area" who knew that Timothy's father was a pagan gentile. So even after the vision of Peter with the cloth full of animals, and what with Cornelius being visibly anointed with the Holy Spirit, and with the recent decision of the Jerusalem Council to **not** require circumcision (a meeting that Paul attended), Paul nonetheless insisted that Timothy was circumcised. Why? Was this an act of hypocrisy on Paul's part? Many Bible commentaries say it was; some early Church Fathers work hard to exonerate Paul by saying that he did the wrong thing for the right reasons. He did it for the sake of taking the Gospel to gentiles, and so that sort of overrides any kind of wrong attitude or fleshly attempt to smooth the pathway into Jewish synagogues by having his gentile companion circumcised, and thus converting Timothy to a Jew. Let's hear what the early Church Father Chrysostom said in his *Catena on the Acts of the Apostles*:

***"Before blessed Paul, who himself had received circumcision, sent Timothy to teach the Jews, he first circumcised him in order that Timothy, as teacher, might be more acceptable to his audience. So Paul actually engaged in circumcision in order to abolish it....."***

So here we have the example of a Church Father who could only find a way out of his self-imposed doctrinal dilemma that circumcision is inherently bad, by saying that Paul engaged in it for the sole purpose of ridding Judaism and Christendom from it!

The first issue we run into in trying to understand this issue with Timothy is really a basic one; but it is perhaps the crux of the matter. Was Timothy born a gentile or a Jew? Most Bible commentaries assume that he is a gentile and of course this fact is especially difficult for them to deal with because here we have St. Paul demanding that this young gentile man is circumcised before Paul will make him part of his missionary team; something that seems to be in direct opposition to the decision of the Jerusalem Council. But I'm here to tell you that the solution is not so difficult: Timothy wasn't a gentile; he was born a Jew.

Jews determine if a child is Jewish according to the birth mother, and NOT the birth father. I will confess that this issue is controversial especially when it comes to gentile scholars who will debate on exactly when matrilineal descent became the Jewish custom; and no matter what the Jewish custom might be, just how it is that God determines whether a person is a Jew or not. We'll not go too deeply into this as several fine books have been written on the general subject of "what is a Jew?" Is it a race? Is it a religion? Is it a nationality? Is it a mindset? Is it an identity that a person can merely choose at their own will and change at another time? So we could get easily bogged down for a very long time in this issue.

Josephus and other writers of that era assume matrilineal descent (the mother's side) for determining the Jewishness of a child. The *Mishna Kiddushin* and *Tosefta Kiddushin* seem also to advocate for determination according to the mother. And then there is also this passage in the Bible in the Book of Ezra that heavily implies the same:

### **Ezra 10:1-3 CJB**

<sup>1</sup> ***While 'Ezra was praying and making confession, weeping and prostrated before the house of God, a huge crowd of Isra'el's men, women and children gathered around him; and the people were weeping bitterly.***

<sup>2</sup> ***Sh'khanyah the son of Yechi'el, one of the descendants of 'Eilam, spoke up and said to 'Ezra, "We have acted treacherously toward our God by marrying foreign women from the peoples of the land. But in spite of this, there is still hope for Isra'el.***

<sup>3</sup> ***We should make a covenant with our God to send away all these wives, along with their children, in obedience to the advice of Adonai and of those who tremble at the mitzvah of our God; let us act in accordance with the Torah.***

Clearly the case being reported here in Ezra is of Jewish men marrying gentile foreign women and then producing children from these unions. The ruling is that Ezra understands that because these children were born to **gentile** women, then they too must be sent away with their mothers. Why? Because despite having Jewish biological fathers, these children have gentile biological mothers thus making them gentiles.

So it works like this: the child of a Jewish mother and a gentile father is a Jew. The child of a gentile mother and a Jewish father is a gentile. If a gentile woman converts and becomes a Jew (as did Ruth), and she and her Jewish husband produce a child, that child is a Jew because the mother is a converted Jew.

Dr. David Stern in his Jewish New Testament Commentary adds this interesting tidbit:

***"The importance of tracing Jewishness through the mother increased when Jewish life became disrupted and Jewish families were broken apart by conquerors and persecutors. The rabbis reasoned, first, that where Jewish women were being abused it might be impossible to determine who the father was and therefore whether he was Jewish; and second, that since a child's loyalties are often determined by the mother because she spends more time with him, a child raised by a Jewish mother and a gentile father is more likely to be brought up loyal to Judaism than the child of a Jewish father and a gentile mother who will not give him the early training that builds such devotion".***

I think, along with Dr. Stern, that it is highly likely that in our story that this Diaspora Jewish woman Eunice thought little of the consequences of marrying a gentile man. She and probably her mother Lois were fully assimilated into the gentile Roman Empire and so weren't particularly observant Jews. Their family had lived in gentile lands for centuries since the



Babylonian Exile, and so any connection they may have had with their Jewishness was distant even if acknowledged. We see this among Jews today with perhaps most Jews (even in Israel) having little to no allegiance to their ancient Hebrew heritage. They will marry anyone from any ethnicity or religion that they happen to fall in love with. In which religion (if any) that their children are raised is unimportant to them. But the more strict Jews in ancient times, as now, will only marry other Jews, and insist that the entire family follow Judaism and be taught its ways.

Probably coming to belief in Yeshua (compliments of Paul) brought a true change of heart for Lois and Eunice as they suddenly realized the great value of being Jewish. What is it that Paul said about the privilege of being a Jew?

<sup>CJB</sup> Romans 3:1 - 2

**<sup>1</sup>Then what advantage has the Jew? What is the value of being circumcised?**

**<sup>2</sup> Much in every way! In the first place, the Jews were entrusted with the very words of God.**

But for some things in life, finally realizing the advantage of their Jewish heritage seemed too late; after all Timothy was the innocent product of an illicit marriage that certainly wouldn't have been sanctioned in the times of Ezra and Nehemiah. Thus even though Timothy was technically a Jew (because his mother was a Jew), because he had a gentile father (it was the father that was responsible to see to it that his son had a ***b'rit milah***, a circumcision), then Timothy wasn't circumcised even though by Jewish law he should have been circumcised many years earlier, on the 8<sup>th</sup> day after his birth.

So the bottom line is this: Paul was not being hypocritical and converting a gentile to a Jew; Paul was validating Timothy's valuable Jewish birthright. Timothy was born a Jew but he had not been circumcised according to the Law of Moses. Paul felt that if Timothy was going to be an effective Jewish evangelist, he would have to be true to his Jewish heritage and to the Law of Moses. Very likely it was not Paul who personally performed the delicate operation; he would have sought a ***mohel***, a person who specialized in doing circumcisions (and this would have been needed especially on an adult).

My take on this is not a new one. The early Church Father Augustine, who lived at the same time as Chrysostom, says this in a letter to another early Church Father, Jerome:

***“As to Paul’s circumcising of Timothy, performing a vow at Cenchrea, and undertaking on the suggestion of James at Jerusalem to share the performance of the appointed rites with some who made a vow, it is manifest that Paul’s design in these things was not to give to others the impression that he thought that by these observances that salvation is given under the Christian dispensation. His intent was to prevent people from believing that he condemned, as no better than heathen idolatrous worship, those rites that God had appointed in the former dispensation as suitable to it and as shadows of things to come. For this is what James said to him, that the report had gone abroad***

**concerning him (Paul) that he taught people to forsake Moses. This would be by all means wrong for those who believe in Christ, to forsake him who prophesied of Christ.....for Christ said "If you had believed Moses, you would have believed me, for he wrote of me."**

I'd have to say that the evidence is that at least some of the early Church Fathers based their devotion to God's Word on the same basis that we at Seed of Abraham do; that is, upon a Hebrew Roots of Christianity devotion. That is precisely what Paul was practicing when he insisted that Timothy was circumcised.

I want to also point out something that I hope is becoming obvious to you; what I have been teaching you about circumcision is more than an interesting but no longer relevant Bible principle. Satan, and by extension our own evil inclinations, somehow knows exactly where the underlying structure of our faith is most vulnerable. These are the places in our understanding where if successfully attacked and conquered can do the most destruction to the Body of Christ. The matter of circumcision of one of these vulnerabilities. Remember: Biblically and in actuality, it is the Covenant of Abraham that promises the Messiah (there called the seed of Abraham) who will bless all the people of all the families on earth. Let me repeat that: Jesus Christ derives from the promise of the Covenant of Abraham. And the Covenant of Abraham requires, and is predicated upon, circumcision. No heart circumcision, no membership in the Covenant of Abraham. No membership in the Covenant of Abraham, no salvation in Christ. As I showed to you in lesson 34, circumcision of the foreskin is the outward physical symbol of the inward spiritual circumcision of the heart. Circumcision of the heart is the only path to repentance. Repentance is the gateway to salvation. No circumcision of the heart; no salvation. Paul laid that out eloquently in Romans 2. And what has happened over the centuries? We have a Church that has been enticed by Satan, and by our leaders' own evil inclinations, to toss the Covenant of Abraham into the dust bin of history like a soiled diaper. And along with it has in recent times trashed circumcision that is the God-ordained sign of participation in the Abrahamic covenant. The rationale is that both things are just too Jewish for a Christian to suffer. May those who have ears to listen, hear.

Verses 4 and 5 say that "they" went on through the towns, delivering the decree of the Jerusalem Council. "They" is referring to Paul, Sila, and Timothy. Let's remember that Sila was one of two chosen emissaries to accompany Paul back from Jerusalem to Antioch to verify the contents of the letter relieving gentiles from having to become Jews to worship Christ. So no doubt as the trio roved from town to town and synagogue to synagogue, it was Sila who was the celebrity. As a result of this decision that assured the Jews that gentile Believers wouldn't ritually defile them, and the same decisions assured the gentiles that they didn't have to become Jews to be ritually clean enough to attend synagogues, the Yeshua movement was strengthened and their numbers grew steadily. A manmade barrier had been removed and the results were stunning.

As they continued on their travels we are told that they traveled through the region of Phrygia and Galatia (Galatia is, of course, the namesake of the letter to the Galatians penned by Paul). But we are told that they went in this direction because the Holy Spirit prevented them from going to the province of Asia (do not confuse this with the modern Continent of Asia). Let me

mention that although most Bibles say “Phrygia AND Galatia” that this is an error. It was not two regions, but rather it was a territory within a region and it was known as Phrygia-Galatica. It was here that Iconium, Lystra, Derbe and Pisidian Antioch were located. So it is no mystery why Paul journeyed throughout Phrygia-Galatica; this was where he had been before and had made many Believers in several towns. So as was his custom, he was now going back to these same congregations to check on their progress.

It is a curious statement to say that the Holy Spirit prevented him from going to Asia; for one reason, there is no explanation of what occurred that “prevented” the three from going. It is not uncommon among Believers to this day to see plans disrupted only to lay the cause at the feet of the Lord as the one who is the sovereign disrupter. That is, we see it as God’s will that something happens or doesn’t happen. It may be something like that that Luke is speaking about; or perhaps it is that during prayer there was an unction of the Spirit that moved among the prayer partners such that they all agreed that for whatever reason Paul, Sila and Timothy should alter their plans. In any case, they saw their inability to go to Asia as God’s will and didn’t fight it.

They had been traveling westward, and so now (with their plans changed) turned northward. Bithynia was a highly civilized and much populated area in northwest Asia Minor that had many Roman cities, but also numerous Jewish settlements. The disciples kept going, but yet another divine “STOP” sign was encountered, and this time the verses tells us it came from the Spirit of Yeshua. Again, it is difficult to understand just what this meant. We only come across the term “Spirit of Yeshua” a couple of times in the New Testament. It may well be that in prayer the Spirit that spoke to them actually identified himself as Yeshua; and considering that it was Paul who was leading the expedition that could make sense. After all; he was the one who, when on the road to Damascus before he was a Believer, was blinded by a bright light and confronted by Yeshua who openly identified himself as such. So perhaps either by name or by method or both, Paul thought it to be Yeshua who blocked their way.

They then decided to pass through Mysia and travel to Troas. Alexandria Troas was a seaport town and it held the status of a Roman colony; so it had a Roman government there, operating under Roman law. There Paul had a vision and this time it was not a warning to avoid going to a particular place, it was a command to go to an area Paul had apparently not included in his plans. He and his companions were to pass over the Aegean Sea and into Europe. Paul’s ability to speak fluent Greek, and his rather unusual standing as a Roman Citizen (unusual for a Jew) was about to come in very handy.

We’ll continue to follow Paul on his 2<sup>nd</sup> missionary journey next time.