

Commentary on Acts chapter 15 by Chuck Smith 4.23.23

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April memory verse Romans 10:17 (NKJV)

So then faith *comes* by hearing, and hearing by the word of God.

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And certain men which came down from Judea [to the church in Antioch] taught the brethren, and said, Except ye be circumcised after the manner of Moses, ye cannot be saved ([Act 15:1](#)).

Unfortunately, there are always those troublers who are going around trying to disrupt God's work among the body of Christ.

It's unfortunate that there are those people that are going around trying to disrupt the work of God. They can't stand you having so much joy in the Lord. Those that are wanting to put you into bondage. You know, "You should never be a happy Christian. You should never be a joyful Christian." And they are always trying to lay their trip on you. It's existed from the beginning. The fellows from Judea who believed in Jesus, but who at one time were Pharisees, came down, they saw the Gentiles worshipping God and they said, "Look, you're not really saved unless you've been circumcised."

Now they believed that salvation was only for the Jew and the only way to become a Christian was to become a Jew. And you could not be saved if you were not a Jew. And so there in the church of Antioch they brought this disturbing doctrine.

When therefore Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension ([Act 15:2](#))

I mean, they really faced these guys and there was a big uproar over it.

they had no small dissension and disputation with them, they determined that Paul and Barnabas, and certain other of them, should go up to Jerusalem unto the apostles and elders about this question ([Act 15:2](#)). So they determined that they should go up to Jerusalem unto the apostles and the elders about this question. "Let's get this thing settled."

And being brought on their way by the church, they passed through Phenice and Samaria, declaring the conversion of the Gentiles: and they caused great joy unto all the brethren ([Act 15:3](#)).

Now churches had already been established in the areas of Phenicia, Lebanon, and in Samaria, and so they were sharing with them everywhere they went of God's work

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among the Gentiles and great joy came to the brethren because of the work of God. But...

And when they were come to Jerusalem, they were received of the church, and of the apostles and elders, and they declared all things that God had done with them ([Act 15:4](#)).

So they gave a missionary report to the church in Jerusalem.

But there rose up certain of the sect of the Pharisees who had become believers, saying, That it was needful to circumcise them, and to command them to keep the law of Moses. And the apostles and elders came together to consider [this problem] this matter. And when there had been much disputing, Peter rose up, and said unto them, Men and brethren, ye know how that a good while ago God made choice among us, that the Gentiles by my mouth should hear the word of the gospel, and believe. And God, which knoweth the hearts, bare them witness, giving them the Holy Ghost, even as he did unto us; and put no difference between us and them, purifying their hearts by faith ([Act 15:5-9](#)).

Peter, first of all, is the one who gives the first witness to the counsel how that God had called him to go to the house of Cornelius to bring him the gospel, and that God obviously worked among them by His grace through faith because they received the gift of the Holy Spirit. God did not make a difference between them, but their salvation was through faith.

Paul tells us in [Romans 3:22](#) that there is no difference. God has taken away the differences. All have sinned, all have come short of the glory of God, but all of us are redeemed through faith in Jesus Christ. Whether we be Jew or Greek, there's no difference. There's only one way to salvation and that's through faith in Jesus Christ. So Peter said,

Now therefore why tempt ye God, to put a yoke upon the neck of the disciples, which neither our fathers nor we were able to bear? But we believe that through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ we shall be saved, even as they ([Act 15:10-11](#)).

In other words, our salvation is just like theirs. It's through grace, through faith. So why should we put on them the yoke, that is, the law, which we nor our fathers were really able to bear? Why hang something on them that we weren't able to handle?

Then all the multitude kept silence, and gave audience to Barnabas and Paul, who declared the miracles and wonders that God had done among the Gentiles through their ministry. And after they had held their peace [that is, the opposition], James ([Act 15:12-13](#))

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Who was the pillar of the early church, the leader of the early church? Not Peter. But James was the leader there in Jerusalem. Not the brother of John, but the half brother of Jesus, whom Jesus appeared to in a special appearance after His resurrection.

James answered, saying, Men and brethren, listen to me: Simeon hath declared how God at the first did visit the Gentiles, to take out of them a people for his name. And to this agree the words of the prophets; as it is written, after this I will return, and will build again the tabernacle of David, which is fallen down; and I will build again the ruins thereof, and I will set it up: that the residue of men might seek after the Lord, and all the Gentiles, upon whom my name is called, saith the Lord, who doeth all these things. Known unto God are all his works from the beginning ([Act 15:13-18](#)).

Now he brings forth a prophecy from the Old Testament where God declared that after His work... After what work? After His work among the Gentiles, He will return again and build again the tabernacle of David which is fallen down. The temple will be rebuilt.

There are those today who try to identify the church as Israel and make all of the prophecies concerning Israel apply to the church. And needless to say, they have so messed up eschatology that they have the church going through the Great Tribulation. They declare that God's work with Israel is finished, that Israel had their opportunity, and that from now on the church is Israel. But it just totally messes up the whole prophetic picture. And actually, the bulk of prophecies where God declares that He will once again return and put His Spirit upon the nation of Israel and work with them as a people.

Now James in the early church recognized that this work among the Gentiles was to draw out a people for His name. We are still living in that age where the dominant work of the Spirit is among the Gentiles, still drawing out a people unto the Lord. He has drawn out you and He has drawn out me. We're a part of this work that God intended to do among the Gentiles as He is developing the body of Christ out of basically the Gentile nation.

But through His grace there is no difference. The Jew is saved just as the Gentile. Right now, as far as God is concerned, there's no racial differences. Salvation is open to every man, Jew and Gentile alike. But the day is coming when the fullness of the Gentiles is come in, then God will again restore His work on the nation of Israel. But here he says he's visiting the Gentiles to take out of them a people for His name.

God knows exactly who those people are; God has a number. And Paul tells us that when the fullness of the Gentiles has come in, then God will deal with Israel once more. But God knows exactly what the fullness of the Gentiles is. For known unto Him are all of His works from the beginning. God knows exactly who is going to be saved. God has always known who was going to be saved. "Known unto Him are all of his works from the beginning."

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I utterly reject the doctrine of the moral government of God that tells us of a God who is limited in His knowledge. A God who is disappointed and shocked by Adam's sin. A God who was caught by surprise when man fell, and had to hastily devise a plan of redemption through the sending of His Son. How is it then that Christ was crucified from the foundations of the world?

I utterly reject that concept of the limited knowledge of God that He doesn't know what you are going to do until you do. And then is so disappointed when you make the wrong choice. "Known unto Him from the beginning are all of his works." He's known it from the beginning of the world. He's known exactly who He is going to save, when He is going to save them, the circumstances under which they will be saved. He knows, He has known from the beginning.

There are no surprises with God. He's omniscient. He can't learn anything new. When you enter into heaven, God is not going to say, "Well, what a surprise to see you here! I really never thought you were going to make it!" You may be surprised, but He won't. For known unto Him are all of his works from the beginning of the world.

And so God knew His plan to reach out to the Gentiles, to draw out a people for His name. God knew that Israel was to be set aside as the favored nation status. That God might work among the Gentiles, but yet, one day as Hosea returned to his unfaithful wife, so God will come to unfaithful Israel and restore His work among them, pouring out His Spirit once more among them and drawing them unto Himself. James says,

Wherefore my sentence is, that we not trouble them, which from among the Gentiles are turned to God: but that we write unto them, that they abstain from pollutions of idols, and fornication, and things strangled, and blood. For Moses of old time hath in every city them that preach him, being read in the synagogues every sabbath day. Then pleased it the apostles and elders, with the whole church, to send chosen men of their own company to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas; namely, Judas whose surname was Barsabas, and Silas, chief men among the brethren: and they wrote letters by them after this manner; The apostles and elders and brethren send greeting unto the brethren which are of the Gentiles in Antioch and Syria and Cilicia: forasmuch as we have heard, that certain which went out from us have troubled you with words, subverting your souls, saying, You must be circumcised, and keep the law; to whom we gave no such commandment: it seemed good unto us, being assembled with one accord, to send chosen men unto you with our beloved Barnabas and Paul, men that have hazarded their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. We have sent therefore Judas and Silas, who shall also tell you the same things by mouth ([Act 15:19-27](#)).

Now Paul and Barnabas had just come back. They said, "Ah, you know, you're not telling us the truth. And you've fabricated the letters, and all." So the church had wisdom in sending Judas and Silas with them to confirm, "Yes, this is indeed what the council decided in Jerusalem. That you as Gentiles are not under the law of Moses. You as Gentiles do not have to proselytize and become Jews in order to be saved. We've

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recognized the work of God's grace in your midst and we recognize that you are saved through faith and the grace of God just as we are, and you don't have to keep the law of Moses in order to be saved." Recognizing that salvation is not a thing of works, but a thing of faith.

And here it was established in the church. Yet, unfortunately, there are so many churches that still insist on a righteousness through works and have established their standards of holiness and their do's and their don'ts in order that you might have a righteous standing before God.

The Galatian church had the same problem after Paul left this area. There were certain men that came in and said, "Now look, Paul doesn't have any authority. He has only taken on the role of an apostle himself, but nobody laid hands on him. And Paul is wrong in teaching you that you have been justified by faith. You've got to keep the law of Moses; you've got to bring forth works that prove your righteousness." So as Paul writes to the Galatians, he says, "O foolish Galatians, who hath bewitched you that you so soon turn away from the truth. Having begun in the Spirit, are you now going to be made perfect in the flesh? This I would learn of you, did you receive Christ by the works of the law or by the hearing of faith? Did you receive the Spirit by the works of the law or the hearing of faith?" And Paul writes to the Galatians who had been subverted by this undercurrent of Judaizing Christianity, which was prevalent in those early days. But the issue was established for the church.

Now there are still those today, Seventh Day Adventist, who proclaim, as did these men from Judea, that you've got to keep the law co-mingled with faith in Christ in order to be saved. Herbert Armstrong in his Good News of the World Tomorrow, also advocates the keeping of the law, as do the Jehovah Witnesses. As the works/righteousness emphasis that they have rather than righteousness through faith, which is the emphasis of the New Testament. And was determined by the church at the council here in the fifteenth chapter of Acts.

So Paul and Barnabas came back to Antioch with the letter, along with Judas and Silas. And so they gave the letter, which said,

For it seemed good to the Holy Ghost, and to us, to lay upon you no greater burden than these necessary things ([Act 15:28](#));

And so they recognized that the counsel that came forth was from the Holy Spirit. Now here I believe that we have an example of the word of wisdom, the gift of the word of wisdom in operation through James. We have disputing parties. We have a strong dispute going on in the church. There is a danger of splitting the church. There are those that are saying they've got to be circumcised and keep the law of Moses. How can they be saved and keep the law of Moses? How can they be saved without doing that?

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Paul says, "Look, it's obvious that God is working among them. There are signs and gifts and they haven't been circumcised." And there is this dispute going on, and James says, "Brethren, this is what I feel we ought to do. Let's write them a letter and just recognize that God has saved them through faith and just tell them that they ought to keep themselves from pollution and from fornication and things that strangled and from blood, and if they do this, they do well." And everybody was satisfied. The word of wisdom through the Holy Spirit.

And so they write, "It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us." Recognizing that the counsel came from the Lord. "To lay upon you no greater burden than these necessary things,"

That ye abstain from meats offered to idols, and from blood, and from things strangled ([Act 15:29](#)),

So the first thing is this thing of meats, which also was a problem in the early church. The Jew would not eat any meat of an animal that was strangled. They had their special way of killing the animal, making sure that all of the blood went out of the animal because of their respect for the blood and the life that was in the blood. And, of course, it was a part of the Mosaic law. And so they reiterated this part of the law to the Gentiles. However, Paul modified this later as he was writing to the Corinthian church.

In those days, quite often, when you would take your sacrifice to the priest to offer it to a pagan god, they would take a portion of the meat and offer it to the god as a sacrifice. But then they would give you what was left and you could have a feast for yourself and your friends. And then often the priest would take that portion that belonged to the priest and they would sell it in the meat markets.

So when you went to the butcher shop to buy a steak, it was quite possible that that particular steak came from an ox that was offered to one of the pagan idols. So Paul said, "When you go to the butcher shop to buy your meat, don't ask the butcher, 'Was this steak offered to an idol?'" He said, "Just buy it, go home and enjoy it without asking questions, for your conscience's sake. Because the meat can't hurt you. Eating meat can't defile you; it can't make you a sinner."

As Jesus said, "It isn't what goes into a man's mouth that defiles a man. It's what comes out of the man's mouth. That which goes into a man passes through his system and on out. It isn't the thing that defiles you. It comes out of the man that is the defiling thing. For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks and out of the heart issue the fornications and all of these other things" ([Mark 7:15-21](#)).

And then Paul said when you're invited to eat, eat what is set before you, asking no questions. So if a friend invites you over to his house to eat and he lays out this beautiful roast, you don't say, "Was this roast offered as a sacrifice to an idol?" He said just eat what's set before you, asking no questions. Again, for conscience's sake.

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So Paul sort of modified these rules in his letter to the Corinthians. And then to the Romans he said, "He that is weak in the faith eats vegetables," as do the Seventh Day Adventists, "and he who is strong in the faith eats meat. Now don't let him who eats meat condemn him who doesn't eat meat." So they don't want to eat meat, that's all right. If they want vegi-weiners and vegi-burgers and all, that's fine. I don't condemn them. But yet, on the other side of the coin, they who don't eat meat should not judge them that do. "Let every man be fully persuaded in his own mind" ([Romans 14:2-5](#)).

So the first rule was concerning their dietary eating habits. They should not eat meat they said that was offered to idols. Paul later on said that's only for conscience's sake.

and from fornication: from which if ye keep yourselves, ye shall do well. Fare ye well ([Act 15:29](#)).

I mean, it was not laying out the whole Mosaic law. Nothing here about the Sabbath Day and the ordinances of the law, it's just, hey, basic, simple things. And if you do this, fine. God bless you.

So when they were dismissed, they came to Antioch: and when they had gathered the multitude together, they delivered this letter: and when they had read it, they rejoiced for the [comfort] consolation. And Judas and Silas, being prophets also themselves, exhorted the brethren with many words, and confirmed them ([Act 15:30-32](#)).

Now the prophets and he who prophesieth speaks unto the church with exhortation, to comfort, to edification. So they were exercising their gift as prophets within the church, exhorting the brethren and confirming them in their faith.

And after they had tarried there a space, they were let go in peace from the brethren unto the apostles. Notwithstanding Silas decided to stay there for a while. Paul also and Barnabas continued in Antioch, teaching and preaching the word of the Lord, with many others also ([Act 15:33-35](#)).

That Antioch church must have been quite a church! With Paul and Barnabas teaching and preaching, and Silas, and that work that God had wrought in Antioch.

And some days after, Paul said to Barnabas ([Act 15:36](#)),

Paul had sort of a restless spirit, I guess. He just couldn't stay at any one place too long. Always moving around. Always anxious to get out. "Let's go! Let's go for it! Let's head out and preach again!" And he could only stay in one place for long before he got antsy and he had to go and get into uncharted territories again. He was always a man who was ready for a challenge. So after some days, Paul said to Barnabas,

Let us go again and visit our brethren in every city where we have preached the word of the Lord, and see how they do ([Act 15:36](#)).

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Let's go back and visit them and see how they're doing.

And Barnabas determined to take with them John, whose surname was Mark ([Act 15:37](#)).

That is, his nephew who had jumped ship in Pamphylia and did not go into the Asia Minor with Paul and Barnabas. He left them in the first journey, and Barnabas was determined to take Mark with him again.

But Paul thought it not good to take him with them, who departed from them from Pamphylia, and went not with them to the work. And the contention was so sharp between them, that they departed asunder one from the other: and so Barnabas took Mark, and sailed unto Cyprus ([Act 15:38-39](#));

Interesting little insight that the Bible gives us concerning these beautiful brothers, Paul and Barnabas. The contention became so great that they split company. Can Christians have disagreements? Obviously.

Now, I see this in a very positive light. I believe that the contention was really from God. I believe that God desired to broaden the missionary endeavor of the church. Rather than having one team go out, I think God wanted two teams to go out. You can cover twice the territory in the same amount of time. Both Paul and Barnabas were skilled missionaries. And so for them to go together again was not a good utilization of manpower. Let's get the gospel out further. So God created this dissension and this dispute with Paul and Barnabas. The net result was the doubling of the efforts.

I think that there is room for disagreement. I think that we must guard, though, in disagreements, that we disagree agreeably, realizing that we are all a part of the body of Christ and maybe God wants to expand His work. So whatever the motive may be for someone starting up another work, God can use it to expand the overall work of His kingdom.

It seems that whenever God is doing a powerful work in an area, there are always those that want to come in and build on another man's foundation. I cannot really understand a man declaring that he has received a call of God to come to Orange County to establish a new church. When there are counties all over the United States that are crying out for someone to come and share the truth! Every week I receive multitudes of letters from people just crying out for us to send someone to minister in their area, because there is no church where they can really be taught the Word of God.

So I have difficulty with that person that says, "Well, God has called me to Orange County." Because of all of the successful, powerful works of God in this county. But nonetheless, though there are many powerful works of God in this county, we surely are not reaching all the people that need to be reached. So that other churches are raised up is good, because God is just expanding His work, and in that we glory.

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And as Paul, writing concerning those in Rome, some preaching Christ out of contention, some have impure motives, bitterness, or whatever, I rejoice that Christ is being preached. That the work of the kingdom of God is expanding.

And I have no ego problem to believe that I have the message for everybody. I know that there are people that I can reach; I know there are people I cannot reach. And I praise God that there are other ministers that have a different emphasis of ministry who are able to reach those people I cannot reach. There are people who need an emotional experience when they go to church. They need emotional releases. So I praise God that He has developed emotional churches. I'd hate to have those emotional people frustrated here. So God knows the needs of people and raises up various ministries, and I rejoice that the work of God is expanding.

So Paul and Barnabas, I believe, God was in the dispute. It is obvious that the dispute did not last forever. And Paul later writes concerning what a blessing Mark was to him and he said, "Please send Mark as quickly as possible. He's been such a blessing to me" ([II Timothy 4:11](#)).

But at this time, God desired to expand the missionary outreach of the church, and so this dispute over Mark between Paul and Barnabas so great that Barnabas took Mark and headed off and went again to Cyprus where Paul and Barnabas had first gone.

And Paul took Silas ([Act 15:40](#)),

This brother who came down. He was a brother of great note in the church in Jerusalem. And Paul took Silas.

and they journeyed, being recommended by the brethren unto the grace of God. And he went through Syria and Cilicia, confirming the churches ([Act 15:40-41](#)).

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