

passed on to faithful men (2 Timothy 2:2). This was the thing he put above all. The Lord is pleased to see a spirit of faithfulness. Christ himself was faithful to his Father's will (Hebrews 2:17, 3:2). To be faithful is to be like the Son of God. If we have a faithful minister, let us be thankful. His ministry may not be spectacular. It might not be popular. But if he is faithful, his church will be saved from many problems and trials. Unfaithful men have ruined countless churches. They have toned down the gospel teaching. They have ceased to call for holy lives. They have failed to watch and to pray for their flock. They have allowed wolves on one side, and sloth on the other, to ruin the sheep. Such men will receive no reward from Christ.

Let us notice finally that *through God's kind provision, good can come out of evil*. This separation was a very sad thing. But God's work was not ruined by it. In fact, God already knew what he would do. He works all things together for good for those who love him (Romans 8:28). Because of this separation, Silas now became a missionary too (verse 40). He was a Roman citizen - which would be very important later on in the mission (16:37). He would gain the opportunity to work with the apostle Paul. And on the trip, Timothy joined the team as Paul's assistant. God already had a man for the vacancy (Acts 16:1). Without the letters to Timothy, how much poorer our New Testament would be! What encouragement and blessing Timothy brought to Paul in later years (1 Timothy 1:2, 2 Timothy 2:2). John Mark surely gained from this too. He would have been encouraged by the confidence which Barnabas showed in him. He would take heart that Barnabas was giving him another chance. And he would be challenged too, that his unfaithfulness had brought about such a sad result. In God's providence, surely this was turned to good. John Mark became a most faithful and useful gospel minister. He learned the lesson, and never turned back again (2 Timothy 4:11). Through this event, instead of one missionary team, there were two. Paul had planned only to revisit some of the churches. But as well as that, a new work began in Europe. Many more churches were planted. How much reason we have to be thankful for that!

This is God's way. All of man's works are spoiled by sin. Nothing we can do is pure and holy as it ought to be. But God is not thwarted by all of this. He can bring great good out of the most unwelcome things. We may not see this at the time. Much of this was still hidden to Paul. He did not yet know Timothy. The new missionary advances were not yet in his mind. He had no idea how John Mark would eventually turn out. But God knew it very well. In all of this, we should see Satan's doom. He plots great evil against God's work. But God's kingdom advances even through it. The eleven brothers sold Joseph into Egypt out of jealousy. But God used it to save the whole family of Israel alive (Genesis 50:20). The devil provoked men to crucify the Son of God. But that move caused his utter doom. The crucified Saviour bore men's sins, and earned for them eternal salvation. The greatest act of evil ever committed was the murder of the Lord Jesus. But it was also the act which has brought infinite good, which we shall enjoy forever. Let us savour these things, and press on. Let us trust our sovereign God!

## ***Expository thoughts on*** **The Acts Of The Apostles**

### ***Daily Bible Reading Notes***

### ***Week 11 (Chapter 14:21-15:41)***

**Grace Church Belper**

**<http://www.gracebelper.org.uk>**

(For previous weeks' notes, visit <http://www.gracebelper.org.uk/readingnotes.php>)

## Acts 14:21-28

21 And when they had preached the gospel to that city and made many disciples, they returned to Lystra, Iconium, and Antioch, 22 strengthening the souls of the disciples, exhorting them to continue in the faith, and saying, "We must through many tribulations enter the kingdom of God." 23 So when they had appointed elders in every church, and prayed with fasting they commended them to the Lord in whom they had believed. 24 And after they had passed through Pisidia, they came to Pamphylia. 25 Now when they had preached the word in Perga, they went down to Attalia. 26 From there they sailed to Antioch, where they had been commended to the grace of God for the work which they had completed. 27 And when they had come and gathered the church together, they reported all that God had done with them, and that he had opened the door of faith to the Gentiles. 28 So they stayed there a long time with the disciples.

Now the first missionary journey comes to an end. In these words, Luke completes his account of it. The first missionaries are returning from their first trip. But their work is not yet over. They re-visit each church in order again. They return to Lystra, Iconium and Pisidian Antioch, before going back to Antioch in Syria. These were places in which they had been hated and chased out. In Iconium, Paul had even been stoned and left for dead! Clearly, their return visit was very important. It could not be left out. It was worth all the danger, sufferings and persecutions it would bring. There was an essential message to be passed on. Let us then read these verses, expecting to find much help for our own souls.

The missionaries' crucial message is summed up for us in ten words. "*We must through many tribulations enter the kingdom of God.*" The message was simple. The message was stark. It could be said in a few words. It would take many years and much pain to realise all that it meant.

This is a truth which is for every believer. This is a truth so important that Paul and Barnabas risked their lives to drive it home. Here is a truth which we must either taste the reality of, or doubt that we are real Christians at all. The way which leads to life is not broad. It is not easy to find, or easy to continue in. There are few who find it, and fewer who make it to the end. The way which leads to life is narrow, and difficult. It is through many tribulations that we must enter the kingdom of God. The enemies of the Christian faith are very many. The devil, the flesh, and the world, are fearful opponents. They will never give up until they are finally damned. The trials which come a Christian's way will be relentless, whilst this present order continues.

How well Paul and Barnabas knew the truth of these things! They had already tasted them many times. Paul had escaped from Damascus let down through a basket from a window. He had fled from Jerusalem to save his life. From Antioch, they had been expelled. From Iconium, a mob had chased them out. In Lystra, Paul had been left for dead, having been stoned. And how much more was still to come! Some years later, he would write "the Holy Spirit witnesses in every city, saying that bonds and afflictions wait for me". He would be ship-wrecked; he would be lashed. He would be in danger

*the contention became so sharp that they parted from one another. And so Barnabas took Mark and sailed to Cyprus; 40 but Paul chose Silas and departed, being commended by the brethren to the grace of God. 41 And he went through Syria and Cilicia, strengthening the churches.*

These sad words tell us about the parting of two of the most godly men in the Christian church. As such, they are words we might want to remain hidden. They surely caused much sadness and shame to the church. But the Holy Spirit has not kept them secret. He has brought them to our attention, so that we might learn from them.

We must learn from these words that *Christians need to persevere*. We are not taken to heaven the instant we believe. The Lord comes to us, but we do not yet go to him! We must remain in this world for a time. We must be surrounded by sin, attacked by the devil, and struggling against ourselves. This is God's will for us. The way is not easy, and we must be very careful. Not everybody who begins the race finishes. We must keep going, if we would receive the prize. Paul knew that many make a good start, but come to nothing. He had already told the Christians that "many tribulations" would be necessary (14:22). There was no other way into the kingdom of God. Now he determined to go and see how they were doing. It was not enough to have preached the gospel to them once. They must be followed-up. They must be re-visited. They needed to be encouraged, in case they should lose heart. They must be exhorted, in case sin's deceitfulness should harden them.

We should not fool ourselves, that because we have begun well, therefore we shall finish well too. There have been too many who have proved that this is false. Judas spent three years with Christ. Not one other apostle knew that he was totally lost (Matthew 26:22). He had preached, and done signs and wonders like the rest of them (Luke 9:1-6). But sin got the better of him, and he was damned. We need to watch ourselves daily. We need fresh supplies of grace and mercy every hour. We must be continually in prayer, and study of the word. We have got to keep up fellowship, and the struggle against sin. Paul knew all of those things. The churches he had planted were real churches. They had elders, who were godly men (14:23). But he knew they needed all the help they could get.

Let us notice from these words that *faithfulness is absolutely essential in a gospel minister*. It was because of lack of faithfulness, that Paul considered John Mark unfit for this trip. Later on, they would work together again. He would ask for him, and praise his usefulness (2 Timothy 4:11). But for now, he decided he could not come. And who can argue that Paul was wrong? At this point, Barnabas disappears from the New Testament's pages. The gospel goes to Rome via Paul, not him. The church commended Paul again to the work - but Luke tells us nothing about Barnabas. We have no record that Paul ever spoke of this decision with regret.

Let us learn from this how essential faithfulness is. Without it, a minister is no minister at all. He may be clever. He may speak so very well. He may draw people to himself easily. He may have every gift and talent. But without faithfulness, he is unacceptable to Jesus Christ. When Paul was a dying man, he gave Timothy a command. The gospel was to be

remained there to do more for them. After some time, Paul's heart turned towards the churches in Asia minor. He wondered how they were doing (verse 36), and he wanted to go and strengthen them (verse 41). They were already proper churches. They had elders, and had been committed to the Lord's care (14:23). But they did not now consider themselves completely independent. They were still brethren in the Lord. Churches who believe the same gospel, ought to care for one another. They should not behave as if they were a law unto themselves. They must remember the need to encourage and strengthen each other. This is the Lord's will. It is not about power and control. It is about serving each other as brothers and sisters with one heavenly Father, and one goal.

Thirdly, we see in this passage that *the most godly men will sometimes fall out*. Here, the apostles Paul and Barnabas parted ways. These were not two young hot-heads. They had been believers for well over a decade. They were two of the church's most capable men. They had proved themselves through many hardships. They had planted churches across hundreds of miles. They had persevered through persecution, and borne fruit. They had laboured side by side for a long time. But now, they fell out. And they fell out so severely, that they could not work together any more. They parted ways. How tragic this was! How Satan must have rejoiced! Persecution and heresy had not broken their fellowship. But now a disagreement over policy did. What glee this must have caused in hell.

We can ask who was right, and who was wrong. John's departure from the work was a very serious thing. A gospel minister must be faithful, above all things (1 Corinthians 4:2). But when Peter fell and denied Christ, he was restored - and swiftly (John 18:15-27, 21:15-19). Neither Paul nor Barnabas was denying a gospel truth. Neither was living in open sin. Both were contending for biblical principles. Which one should win out? Wherever we make the decision, the fact is that they still fell out. They could not come to an agreement. They ended up parting ways. Thank God it was temporary (Colossians 4:10)! But it was real. Whoever was right, and whoever was wrong, it happened. We ought to take note of this. The best of men, are still men. The most holy of sinners, are still sinners. Until we are glorified, we shall never be immune from stumbling. Let us not lose heart because we see these things happening. Let us not be perplexed because the most excellent men cannot agree. Let us remember that there is only one perfect man. We do not follow our teachers. We follow Jesus Christ, and our teachers insofar as they model him (1 Corinthians 11:1). Let us be ready for many heart-breaking disappointments. How grievous it must have been to the believers to see their two heroes fall out! These things ought to teach us - we are far weaker than we imagine. Any confidence in man will prove false. Let us lift up our eyes, more and more, to the Lord Jesus Christ.

## Acts 15:36-41

*36 Then after some days Paul said to Barnabas, "Let us now go back and visit our brethren in every city where we have preached the word of the Lord, and see how they are doing." 37 Now Barnabas was determined to take with them John called Mark. 38 But Paul insisted that they should not take with them the one who had departed from them in Pamphylia, and had not gone with them to the work. 39 Then*

from Jew and Gentile alike. His nearest friends would turn away from him. He would be weary, in pain, cold and unclothed. And above all would be his deep concern from the churches (2 Corinthians 11:23-28). Years earlier, the Lord had said "I will show him how great things he must suffer for my name's sake" (Acts 9:16). Truly, Paul was speaking of things that were very close to home!

No doubt the extent of Paul's trials was especially severe. Surely he was a notable example, for all those who were to come (c.f. 1 Timothy 1:16). But that does not mean he was alone. It means the very reverse! Just as he endured such trouble, so we must expect trouble too. This is the way of the master. Christ went to glory, through the death of the cross. And if we would go to be with Christ, we must take up the cross too. The way to live is to daily die. Every price must be paid in the service of the Lord. We must give our all, and then give it again. This is the only way to be safe. If we expect anything less, we shall be severely disappointed.

No doubt our trials differ very much. Not all of them are open, physical pain. Trials come in many shapes and sizes. Others are clear to all. Some are hidden, and known only to us and God. Some are sudden, and very intense. Others are slow, and chip away over many years. What a trial it is to the faithful today to see how slowly the work of God goes on! What a test of faith to stick to the Bible's words, when so many have turned away! What a burden to our souls to see so many lose heart on the way. How hard to hold to the old paths, and the old truths, when so few do. But let us not be surprised at this. Let us take to heart Paul's words.

The great truth in these words is that *Christ is looking for disciples, not converts alone*. It is a great thing when a sinner turns to the Lord. But it is not the end. It is only the start. Christ did not die merely so that people might name his name. He died so that they might become entirely his, in thought, word and deed. The word used in verse 22 is "disciples". Disciples are more than converts. They are people with a master, and a lord. They are students and pupils, who sit at his feet, and obey his will. Christ told his apostles to make disciples of all nations (Matthew 28:19). The believers were exhorted to *continue* in the faith (v22). The missionaries gathered churches, not just a few individuals here and there. They appointed elders, to carry on the work until the end (v23). We must take these words to heart. They are written for our learning and gain. Christ looks for lasting fruit from us (John 15:16). And for this, we must persevere through many trials.

Who can cope with these things? Let us see then from these verses that *our God is sufficient for us*. This is the other great message of these words. The churches were not left on their own. It is true that the missionaries departed from them. And they were so young in the faith! They had believed scarcely a year or less. But they were not alone. They were "commended to the Lord" (v23). The apostles had gone under the Lord's care. And he had kept them all the way. Now, they committed the believers to the same care. They would have many trials. But the Lord would keep them through them all. On leaving Antioch at the start, they had trusted "the grace of God" (v26). And now they came back, to report "all that God had done with them" (v27). What an encouragement that must have been for the church at Antioch. They had now tasted and seen that the Lord was good. God's faithfulness was not just an idea to them. It was now seen by them,

in flesh and blood. How good it is for us if we have learnt these things! If we have stepped out in faith, and proved God's word to be true. He will never let us down; he is sufficient for us. Nothing else can be. The nearest of family and friends will disappoint us. But our God never will. He has loved us enough to give his dear Son. The Lord Jesus shed his blood on the cross to secure our salvation. If he has done this, then he will do all. Let us trust in him! There are many trials before entering the kingdom of God. But there is not one, in which God is not enough.

## Acts 15:1-6

*1 And certain men came down from Judea and taught the brethren, "Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved." 2 Therefore, when Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and dispute with them, they determined that Paul and Barnabas and certain others of them should go up to Jerusalem, to the apostles and elders, about this question. 3 So, being sent on their way by the church, they passed through Phoenicia and Samaria, describing the conversion of the Gentiles; and they caused great joy to all the brethren. 4 And when they had come to Jerusalem, they were received by the church and the apostles and the elders; and they reported all things that God had done with them. 5 But some of the sect of the Pharisees who believed rose up, saying, "It is necessary to circumcise them, and to command them to keep the law of Moses." 6 So the apostles and elders came together to consider this matter.*

We are now at the centre of the book of Acts. We are at its heart. Until now, the church has been full of Jews. But Gentiles have been joining in increasing numbers. Now, the Gentiles are beginning to dominate the church. Some issues now need to be settled once and for all. Will Gentiles be full members of the church? Will Jews have a special place within it? Will the church be split into two, or be one? Is the gospel Jewish? This chapter is the last time we meet Peter. From now on, it is all Paul. We do not read about the church at Jerusalem any more. It is all in the Gentile world. The mission to the Gentiles was secured. A major threat to the gospel was seen off. Let us study these important words, with care!

One thing we must learn from these words is that *serious difficulties for the church will arise from inside it as well as outside*. Satan has two main routes for attack. He will persecute the church from the outside. He will lead the world to attack it, or to laugh at it, or to ignore it. In the previous chapters, we have seen a great deal of his attacks. There have been mobs, stonings and expulsions. But this is not the devil's only strategy. He will also attack from the inside too. If he cannot ruin the church one way, he will seek to do it the other. If he cannot break its faith, he will seek to undermine it. There is more than one way to bring down a stronghold. You can attack it openly during broad daylight. But you can also corrupt the soldiers who defend it, and weaken it from inside. You can tunnel underneath, and remove its foundations.

There are then two duties for Christians in defending the church. They must stand firm against the ungodly world. They must resist the temptation to give way to ungodly ideas and pressure. But they must also learn to watch what is going on inside. This is much

Now we learn about what happened after the Jerusalem council was finished. We learn about what happened when its letter was sent, and the encouragement and rejoicing which it brought. The upholding of the gospel should encourage all truly godly people. When error is refuted and rejected, they should be happy. When false teachers are exposed, and their soul-destroying lies are revealed, great good has been done. The perfection and sufficiency of the work of Jesus Christ was upheld. The gospel of free salvation to everybody who believes was protected. That was good news for everyone truly taught by the Spirit of God.

These verses help us by *correcting a mistake about prophecy*. There are many ideas about prophets and prophecy today. Some of them are very strange, and have little connection to God's word. Verse 32 explains what the main work of the prophet was. It was not to impress the people with spectacular things, nor even to reveal the future. The main work of the prophets was to "exhort the brethren" and to "strengthen them". Their ministry was to encourage the believers. It was to speak the truths of God, so as to build up the disciples. The way in which this work was done was miraculous. It included a special gift of God's Spirit. The prophets were able to speak, without error. Everything they said, was the living word of God. They were kept from all mistakes, and could speak without hours of study in preparation. But the things which they spoke, were the things spoken by every other teacher. The truths they applied were the same truths which are now recorded for us in the New Testament Scriptures. Their ministry was miraculous, but the same at heart as every gospel minister. At times the prophets did announce future events. Agabus announced a great famine to come (11:28), and Paul's binding (21:11). But such things were not their meat and drink. The heart of their work, was to speak about the gospel of Christ. This is Scripture's consistent teaching (1 Corinthians 14:3-4, 31). The work of the Old Testament and New Testament prophets was the same. The first spoke miraculously about the Christ who was coming; the second spoke miraculously about the Christ who had come. In neither case was telling the future the main thing. Christ was (Luke 24:44, 1 Peter 1:10-12). When Silas was deciding what to do in the future, he did not act because of a prophetic word. He was a prophet himself, but God's words were focused on Christ. Silas had no word about whether to stay at Antioch, or return to Jerusalem. He stayed at Antioch because it "seemed good" to him (verse 34). His prophecies were not about such matters. They were about the Lord Jesus, and the salvation in him.

We ought then to be convinced that today's prophets, are no prophets at all. They do not follow this rule. The heart of their work is the supposed revealing of secret things. They spend their time predicting, and foretelling the future. By doing so, they show that they are not sent by God. By making this the heart of their work, they prove that their gift is fake. The fact that what they predict often does not happen either only proves what we already know (Deuteronomy 18:22).

Let us see from these verses too *the importance of brotherly fellowship*. The Jerusalem council's verdict was not just for scholars and theologians. It was for the whole church. This was why they met - they cared for all the brethren. When the prophets came to Antioch, they spent time and energy to encourage the church. It was not "their" church - that was in Judah. But it was their church - because really there is only one. Silas

not think this way though; neither did Jesus Christ (Matthew 23). False teachers must be identified, refuted, and rejected. Paul wrote: "Now I beseech you, brethren, mark them which cause divisions and offences contrary to the doctrine which you have learned; and avoid them" (Romans 16:17). John said, "If anyone comes to you, and brings not this doctrine, receive him not into your house, neither greet him: For he that greets him is partaker of his evil deeds." (2 John 10-11).

Thirdly, let us learn to *be careful about adding to the word of God*. This was the error of the Judaisers. They added to the gospel. They required circumcision too. But the apostles and elders did not make this mistake. And as they wrote to the Gentile churches, they put a limit upon what they required. They would not go beyond what the Holy Spirit had revealed was good (verse 28). They would not add anything more than what God had said.

We must do likewise. Do not make the mistake of thinking that it is safe to go beyond God's word. This is to be wiser than God. Many think that if they impose many extra rules upon themselves, they do well. But they do not. God has told us all that we need. To go beyond that is to go into danger, not safety. Proverbs 30:6 says, "Do not add to his words, in case he rebukes you, and you be found a liar." The commandments and teachings of men, said Paul, do indeed have the appearance of wisdom. But they have no value in restraining the sins of the flesh (Colossians 2:23). If they did, God would have commanded them. But what God directs us to is not endless rules. It is to walk closely with Jesus Christ. It is to mortify sin by reliance upon his death. It is to become holy by drawing strength from him. It is to ask for power by his Spirit, not from our own rules. God's word is large enough. We could live for a thousand years, and understand new things that it requires from us each day. Let us not add to it, or God will add to us his severe curse (Revelation 22:18).

## Acts 15:30-41

*30 So when they were sent off, they came to Antioch; and when they had gathered the multitude together, they delivered the letter. 31 When they had read it, they rejoiced over its encouragement. 32 Now Judas and Silas, themselves being prophets also, exhorted the brethren with many words and strengthened them. 33 And after they had stayed there for a time, they were sent back with greetings from the brethren to the apostles. 34 However, it seemed good to Silas to remain there. 35 Paul and Barnabas also remained in Antioch, teaching and preaching the word of the Lord, with many others also. 36 Then after some days Paul said to Barnabas, "Let us now go back and visit our brethren in every city where we have preached the word of the Lord, and see how they are doing." 37 Now Barnabas was determined to take with them John called Mark. 38 But Paul insisted that they should not take with them the one who had departed from them in Pamphylia, and had not gone with them to the work. 39 Then the contention became so sharp that they parted from one another. And so Barnabas took Mark and sailed to Cyprus; 40 but Paul chose Silas and departed, being commended by the brethren to the grace of God. 41 And he went through Syria and Cilicia, strengthening the churches.*

harder! We expect the world to not understand the church. But those who are inside, are meant to be brethren. They are meant to be on our side. They are meant to have the same faith and the same beliefs. But experience will show that it is not always so.

In this case, the danger was from open heresy. The gospel of Christ was corrupted, and something else taught in its place. This was done publicly, and even in the presence of an apostle like Paul. "Certain men" taught that faith in Christ was not enough, to be saved (verse 1). They insisted on something else besides. They said that it was necessary for the Gentiles to become Jews. They must be circumcised, otherwise they were not true Christians after all. The church was Jewish, and must always be so. Christ's blood was not enough. The risen Lord had not truly accepted Gentile Christians. Something more was necessary. There were Gentiles in the church who were not circumcised, but they could not stay that way. They must Judaize, or be lost.

These things were taught openly, even in a church with the apostle Paul and Barnabas! These heretics did not blush to spread their errors then. And they will not blush to do so now either. If such things could be taught in the days of the apostles, they will certainly be taught now. If men felt free to tinker with the gospel within a few years of the Lord's death and resurrection, then they will certainly feel free to do so today. And so we must be on our guard.

There are many soul-destroying errors taught in Christian churches today. The most obvious one is that of Roman Catholicism. According to Rome, we must have priests, masses and all kinds of rituals if we would be saved. Simply trusting in the death of Christ is not enough. We must also have all the ceremonies of the church. This is simply a new Judaising in disguise. It is the blasphemy of salvation by good works. We must oppose it.

Another error is the teaching that everybody called a Christian should be treated as one. According to these teachers, it is unloving not to do so. They say that everybody who calls Jesus "Lord" is to be accepted, whatever else they believe. Others say that a man may be a Christian, even though his life shows no change. He is as unholy as anyone in the world, but if he has prayed a prayer to Jesus, he will be saved. Others teach we may be Christians without even knowing it. Muslims, Hindus, and even atheists are "believers in disguise". They have responded to the urge in them to do good as best they are able, and so are received by God as if they were true Christians. This teaching was all completely unknown to the apostles of Christ. They never taught it, or endorsed it. They taught that a man is a Christian who hears, understands and yields himself to the gospel of Christ, and proves the reality of it by a holy life. Others, they taught, would certainly be damned.

Paul and Barnabas teach us that *serious errors must be openly and fiercely opposed*. There must be no compromise in dealing with them. Wherever they appear in the church, they must be confronted. They must be refuted. This must carry on being done, until they are gone. There can be no peace with deadly error. Deadly error will ruin the church; therefore, we cannot rest when it is taught. Paul and Barnabas had "no small dissension and dispute". They were willing to travel hundreds of miles to Jerusalem to establish that

there was no disagreement amongst the apostles about it. Some in the church at Jerusalem had compromised with the false teaching. They did not teach that circumcision was necessary to be saved. But they said that it should be done anyway (v5). To refute this error, the Jerusalem council was held (v6).

We must avoid the thinking that says that opposing error is only for some. It is not for those who are naturally contentious or argumentative! It is for everyone who loves the truth of God. It is for everyone who cares about the way of salvation, and the church of Christ. There are only two choices available. Either heresy must be opposed, or it must ruin us. There can be no peace between truth and lies. Soul-saving truth and soul-destroying error cannot live together. One of them must go. For the Lord's honour, and for the good of the church, we must not rest when ruinous errors are taught.

### **Acts 15:6-11**

*"6 So the apostles and elders came together to consider this matter. 7 And when there had been much dispute, Peter rose up and said to them, "Men and brethren, you know that a good while ago God chose among us, that by my mouth the Gentiles should hear the word of the gospel and believe. 8 So God, who knows the heart, acknowledged them, by giving them the Holy Spirit just as he did to us, 9 and made no distinction between us and them, purifying their hearts by faith. Now therefore, why do you test God by putting a yoke on the neck of the disciples which neither our fathers nor we were able to bear? 11 But we believe that through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ we shall be saved in the same manner as they."*

Thank God for Peter! Praise the Lord for men who are clear and decisive in troubled times. Praise God for men who clearly speak the truth when it is called into doubt. The Jerusalem council met. All the "apostles and elders came together to consider this matter". It was a vital question. The whole future of the church depended upon it. Was the church Jewish? Must every Gentile become like the Jews? Was circumcision necessary to be saved? Was Paul and Barnabas' Gentile mission godly? Had they taught the authentic truth? Were they real apostles, or frauds? Let us pay attention to Peter's reply!

Peter said clearly that *salvation was always by grace alone, through faith*. He declared that there had only ever been one way to be saved, and one alone. That way was "through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ" (verse 11). If the Jews were saved, it would be "in the same manner as they" (verse 11). There were not two ways, but only one; and that one way was all by grace. God had made this clear from the very first time a Gentile was saved. By God's will, Peter had first preached - to Cornelius, in Acts chapter 10. God's will had not been that those Gentiles should be circumcised, but that they should *believe* (verse 7). When God saw the Gentiles' faith, he gave them the Holy Spirit "just as he did to [the Jews]". God's testimony had been clear. Believing was all that he required. No works were needed. No obedience to the ceremonies of Moses was asked for. Simple trust in the crucified and risen Saviour was what he was looking for. Beyond that, God made no distinctions at all. There was one church; one Lord, one faith, and one baptism. Anyone who has his heart purified, has it done "by faith" (verse 9).

"leading men" (verse 22). It was not enough to send men only. They also made sure that the decision was written down (verse 23). They did not write it just in the names of a few - but of the whole church (verse 23).

Here we see, then, that false doctrine is a very serious thing. Upon rejecting it, the health of whole churches hung. Correct teaching is absolutely essential. Teaching is not mere theory. It is not just the spreading of ideas. It is not something just for discussion, and to interest our minds. Neither is it just a matter of opinion, one man's against another's, with no practical effects. How many there are who treat doctrine this way! How many there are who think it is all a matter of arguing over words. How many churches think that there are much better things to pay attention to. But the early church completely rejected that way of thinking. Doctrines are not just ideas. Ideas also have results. Beliefs get put into practice. The things we accept, affect every part of our hearts and lives. The circumcision teaching troubled the believers' souls. It took away their assurance of being saved. It lessened the comfort that came from Jesus Christ. It brought in uncertainty and doubt over his perfect and all-sufficient work. It down-played the power of his blood, and removed their grounds for having confidence in it.

The only way that doctrine can make no difference is if there is no God. If the world is meaningless, and if atoms and molecules are all that there is, then nothing matters. If we are just random chemicals with no meaning or purpose, then we may do what we like with ideas. But if God exists, and if there is a Saviour, and if there is a hell to be avoided and a heaven to be won, then doctrine is all-important. We must take care as to what teachings we accept. We ought to be like the people of Berea, who did not accept new teaching straight away. Rather, they "searched the scriptures daily" to see if the things they were taught were so (Acts 17:11). They knew that the truth of God was not a light thing. If a thing is true, it must be completely obeyed. Our whole lives must be brought to agree with it. If it is false, it should be entirely ignored. We should take no notice of it at all. Let us be careful as to what we believe. It will make all the difference to us.

Let us see secondly that *false teaching must be dealt with decisively, and false teachers must be separated from*. We have already remarked on the very firm action that was taken. The Jerusalem church went to great lengths to make the verdict clear. They wanted to leave no doubt at all. They wrote with conviction about those who had taught that the uncircumcised were unsaved. They distanced themselves from them, and disowned them completely. They had gone out to Antioch, but not sent by the Jerusalem church (verse 24). The church was now sparing no effort to make clear its utter rejection of all that they stood for.

This is the Biblical way. It is not the way of our present age. But it is what God has said. False teachers are not to be dealt with lightly. They are not to be given respect, or acceptance in any way. No doubt there are lots of questions on which Christians will differ. No doubt, it is not until heaven that our doctrine will all perfectly agree. But when the gospel is tampered with, we must not be in two minds. The way of our age is to never move beyond discussion. All teachers, true or false, must be treated as interesting and their viewpoints valid. To condemn them is evidence of a bitter and unloving spirit. Charity will never pass sentence, and will always keep the case open. The apostles did

another. We must do what builds each other up, not tears one another down. Our liberty is not a license to offend others and not care. This was the meaning of James' advice. The laws of Moses were read throughout the Jewish world. They were taught every Sabbath day. Thousands of Jews had had them hammered into their heads from their first days. The Gentiles must not behave as if these things were not so. They must not ride over them with glee, caring nothing for any offence. James told them to avoid the things that would especially distress zealous Jews.

There seems yet to be more in James' words than this. Why did he highlight the things he did? The meaning seems to be this too. Christians need not become Jews - but they cannot remain as pagans. The things picked out were especially parts of idol worship. They were found in the temples of all the false gods. Christians need not adhere to Israel's particular laws. But they must abandon every pagan way. Let us take note of this as well. God has not given us a minute list of hair-splitting rules. But he has told us to separate ourselves from the world. We have liberty to do what we consider wise, as long as we do not sin. But we do not have liberty to live as we did before. Our priorities must change. We have a new master. We now acknowledge one God, and one Lord. We cannot worship the gods of success, wealth, pleasure and fame like the rest of the world.

## Acts 15:22-29

*22 Then it pleased the apostles and elders, with the whole church, to send chosen men of their own company to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas, namely, Judas who was also named Barsabas, and Silas, leading men among the brethren. 23 They wrote this letter by them: The apostles, elders, and the brethren, to the brethren who are of the Gentiles in Antioch, Syria and Cilicia: Greetings. 24 Since we have heard that some who went out from us have troubled you with words, unsettling your souls, saying, "You must be circumcised and keep the law" - to whom we gave no such commandment - 25 it seemed good to us, being assembled with one accord, to send chosen men to you with our beloved Paul and Barnabas, 26 men who have risked their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. 27 We have therefore sent Judas and Silas, who will also report the same things by word of mouth. 28 For it seemed good to the Holy Spirit, and to us, to lay upon you no greater burden than these necessary things: 29 that you abstain from things offered to idols, from blood, from things strangled, and from sexual immorality. If you keep yourselves from these, you will do well. Farewell.*

Here was the letter which was written, after the Jerusalem council. This letter gave the church's decision. Here we find the outcome of the whole matter. This was the result which was so important for the early church, and the mission to the world. It is full of things of which we ought to take careful note.

Let us notice firstly *what is said about false doctrine*. Here we may see what the early church thought about it. Verse 24 says that the false teaching had "troubled [them] with words". It had caused their souls to be unsettled. The problem was so serious, that great effort was spent in solving it. There must be no doubt about its outcome. It was not enough to send Paul and Barnabas back with the results. They also sent two of their own

Here is a truth which we must hold on to with our very lives. It is not a question for the scholars and boffins. It is a question which will determine whether we go to heaven, or to hell. It is a question which everyone must answer. What are we relying on, for our acceptance with God? Is it that we have been good Christians, kept God's commandments, read his Word, been to church, and all these things? Is it that we are as good as any other is, and we pray, and are God-fearing men and women? Or do we completely reject these things as of any worth to justify us before God? Do we trust in Jesus Christ alone? Is he our righteousness, and him alone? Are we relying solely on his precious blood to wipe away our sins from God's sight? Are we resting in his perfection as our only grounds of acceptance before God?

There is only one way to be saved. It is if Jesus Christ has died for us, and if we have trusted in him. We must not make a mistake on this matter. Ask your own soul - where is your confidence? If you died tonight, how could you enter the presence of God? What would make you sufficiently pure and clean, to dwell with him who is holy? What offering could you bring to take away your guilt and sin? This is a matter on which we must be very clear. There is no room in the church for two opinions. We are saved by Christ alone, or we are not saved at all.

Let us see as the other side of this coin, that *there is no salvation through the works of the law*. Everything God had done with Cornelius had made this clear. Peter had chewed over it, and taken it to heart. Cornelius was not a proselyte. He had not been circumcised. He had declined to take on the Jewish law. But God had given him the Spirit, just as much as to the Jews. Peter said that God had "made no distinction between them and us, purifying our hearts by faith" (verse 9). It was not the case that the Gentiles were saved by faith, and Jews by law. Neither was it the case that the Jews were saved by faith plus law. Both were saved by faith alone, without the works of the law at all.

There is a good reason why salvation does not come through the law. The law sets a standard which we cannot keep. Its requirements are far beyond us. Its demands are above our capability to obey. This is not because they set an unfair target. It is not because God requires us to do miracles. We are responsible for our inability. Our own hearts are corrupt. We are slow, and dull, in the things of God. God requires nothing from us that is not good and right. But we cannot do it, because we are not good but are corrupt. Hence Peter said that the law was "a yoke". Its commands can never bring peace with God. They tell us what is right, but give us no power to do it. The Jews had continually been punished by God, for their unfaithfulness. They had breached their covenant again and again. And this was what the false teachers would bring to the church! This would not be progress. This would be going precisely the wrong way. The gospel declares that Christ has kept the law on our behalf. Our status does not depend on our own doings. It depends on what he has already done. The law is not the way to a good relationship with God. That comes only through faith in Christ.

How many there are who look to the law for their peace with God! They seek to be good, and hope that God is pleased. They imagine that God is a man, and should accept imperfect efforts. They think of God as if he were imperfect too, as if he must accept

good when it is mixed up with sin. But God is not such a one. He is holy, perfectly and fully so. He cannot tolerate the smallest appearance of sin. He cannot admit it into his flawless presence. If we are tainted by sin, we must be banished - unless we are saved by faith. Unless we have the perfection of another - of Jesus Christ - we cannot live with God. That perfection is not earned. It is a free gift. Let us, then, like Peter, believe that in this way we shall be saved - as any other. Here is good news for sinners. The most awful of rebels against God's commands may now find hope. The law bars his way to heaven. It gives no good news to the repentant sinner. But the gospel declares that all who trust in Christ have everlasting life. Let us give great thanks to God for this unspeakable gift!

## Acts 15:12-21

*12 Then all the multitude kept silent and listened to Barnabas and Paul declaring how many miracles and wonders God had worked through them among the Gentiles. 13 And after they had become silent, James answered, saying, "Men and brethren, listen to me: 14 Simon has declared how God at the first visited the Gentiles to take out of them a people for his name. 15 And with this the words of the prophets agree, just as it is written: 16 'After this I will return and will rebuild the tabernacle of David which has fallen down. I will rebuild its ruins, and I will set it up, 17 so that the rest of mankind may seek the Lord, even all the Gentiles who are called by my name, says the Lord who does all these things.' 18 Known to God from all eternity are all his works. 19 Therefore I judge that we should not trouble those from among the Gentiles who are turning to God, 20 but that we write to them to abstain from things polluted by idols, from sexual immorality, from things strangled, and from blood. 21 For Moses has had throughout many generations those who preach him in every city, being read in the synagogues every Sabbath."*

Now Paul and Barnabas, and then James, speak. This is not James the brother of John; he was beheaded in chapter 12. This is James, half-brother of the Lord. He became an important leader in the Jerusalem church. 1 Corinthians 15:7 and Galatians 1:19 indicate that he was counted with the apostles. He was a spiritual man. He drew the matter to a conclusion. This is what spiritual men do. They speak the truth, and make things clear. Let us listen to what they all said.

These words clearly teach one main thing. *God had always had one plan - Jews and Gentiles together, in one church.* He had made it clear when Cornelius was converted. What he had done was just the same as with the Jews at first. He had "visited (them) to take out of them a people for his name." This was very Jewish language. It was what God had done with the nation of the Jews. This was what the prophets had announced. They had never thought that God was saving Israel for its own sake. God's purpose was always much larger than this. His plan was that through Abraham, all the families of the earth would be blessed (Genesis 12:3). His intention was that Israel's light should be for all the nations. The Messiah would bring salvation to the ends of the earth (Isaiah 42:6, 49:6). The New Testament church was not an unexpected event. It had not come from nowhere. God had not changed his mind. He was doing what he had always planned. "Known to God from all eternity are all his works." (verse 18). God had always said that Gentiles would be called by his name (verse 17).

It is hard for us to realise how revolutionary this was. Many of the Jews had been taught the opposite all their lives. They looked at Israel's privileges. They looked at the darkness of the outside world. They looked at God's promises to the Jews. They looked at the paganism that was everywhere else. And they concluded that salvation was Jewish and would always be so. If Gentiles were ever saved, it would be through becoming Jews. But this was not God's plan at all. It was not what the prophets said. It was not what he had planned. It was not what had happened with Cornelius. It was not what was happening through the missions of Paul and Barnabas. Jesus Christ was making it clear: he had one church, containing Jew and Gentile alike.

We must understand that there are not lots of true religions. God does not accept any man's worship, whatever teachings he follows. The sincere are not the saved. There is no saving value in Islam, Hinduism, Sikhism or any other "world faith". God has always had a single plan. God has a single church, for every nation. He has one Son, who has bled and died for sinners out of every people and race. He does not intend there to be many paths to himself. He intends all of those who are rescued to be together, in one church. There is one God, not many. There is one world, not lots. There is one human race, not several. And there is one church and one Saviour for them all. Let us take good note of this. There are many today who call this teaching bigoted and wrong. They say that God must accept whatever is done sincerely. God, though, says no such things. He says that he accepts those for whom Christ died, whom the Holy Spirit has enlightened, and who have believed the gospel. It is not generous to corrupt the words of God. It is not loving or tolerant to speak lies that send people to hell. The spirit of kindness and wide mercy is one which preaches Christ to all, not one that leaves them to perish in false religions.

Let us notice *how James interpreted the Old Testament Scripture.* As he read about the rebuilding of the temple, he understood it of Christ. The house of David would be built up - this meant the church! Amos spoke of a house of God being reared up - that house was the people who trust in Jesus. The rebuilding of Israel's ruins would be in the New Testament people of God - not in a mere house of bricks and stone, no matter how magnificent.

We must read the Bible with understanding. It is a book which points to Christ. Its purpose is not to educate us about politics, or possible future events. It is not given to explain happenings in the Middle East. Its purpose is to draw us to Christ. Christ is the one we need; Christ is all we need. Christ is the future; the growth of his church is history's real story. Nations will come and nations will go. The word of God has plenty of things to say about them; but God's people are those who believe in Jesus, and nobody else. There are no favours or privileges for any who reject God's son. Let us avoid the danger of treating the Bible as a secret code book. Prophecy is not intended to be a pursuit for the eccentric and the crank. It is meant to be so that every child of God may adore the Lord Jesus Christ.

Let us see finally that *Christians must act wisely.* We have great freedom. All the burdens of the ceremonies of the Old Testament law are taken from us. We need not be circumcised, or obey any of the details of the sacrificial system. But we must love one