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WHEN GRACE WON A VICTORY OVER LEGALISM

A STUDY OF THE BOOK OF ACTS
NUMBER 63
ACTS 15:12-29

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ACTS 15:12-29 "Then all the multitude kept silence, and gave audience to Barnabas and Paul, declaring what miracles and wonders God had wrought among the Gentiles by them. And after they had held their peace, James answered, saying, Men and brethren, hearken unto 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 of the world. Wherefore my sentence is, that we trouble not them, which from among the Gentiles are turned to God: But that we write unto them, that they abstain from pollutions of idols, and from fornication, and from things strangled, and from 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 surnamed 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, Ye 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. For it seemed good to the Holy Ghost, and to us, 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, and from fornication: from which if ye keep yourselves, ye shall do well. Fare ye well.

We have been in a study of the important Jerusalem conference which had been convened to settle a dispute concerning salvation and spirituality by grace versus salvation and spirituality by works. This is the great issue that had to be settled. Here in our passage for study now is the summary given by James. James was the half-brother of Jesus and did not believe in Christ as Saviour until after the resurrection. He is described as one of the children of Mary and Joseph in Matthew 13:55 and in Mark 6:3. By comparing certain verses like John 7:5 and 1 Corinthians 15:7 we conclude that James was saved after the resurrection of Jesus. The fact that James is the Pastor of the Jerusalem Church is brought out in Galatians 2 and Acts 14:13. He was the established leader of the Jerusalem Church and he wrote the Epistle of James. The time of this conference is about 35 or 36 A.D. and the Jerusalem Church is still going strong even though it was filled with legalism. In 70 A.D. this church will go out of existence with the destruction of Jerusalem and it is never heard of again. In 2 Peter 3:18 we read, "Grow in grace and knowledge" and this means that grace and knowledge go together. There is no genuine understanding of Christianity aside from grace.

ACTS 15:13 "And after they had held their peace, James answered, saying, Men and brethren, hearken unto me:" The phrase "After having become silent" carried the idea that there had been great applause and response to the findings of the conference. And in this spirit of excitement and approval James says, "Listen to me".

ACTS 15:14 "Simeon hath declared how God at the first did visit the Gentiles, to take out of them a people for his name." He begins with the word "Simeon" which is Aramaic for the word "Simon". Simon Peter, you recall, got his name from Jesus. That day when Peter said, "Thou art the Christ the Son of the Living God". Jesus said your name is "Peter" and the word means a little chip of rock from the big rock. Jesus Christ is the great rock and Peter was a little chip off of the great rock. So James here refers to the ministry Peter had in Caesarea when Cornelius and the other Gentiles were converted. "To take out" means to receive a people for his name. In other words, this proved Gentiles were just as acceptable as Jews in the salvation plan. Jesus will ascend and will remain at the right hand of God until the body is formed. Israel is never called the body of Christ but the church is the body of Christ. The church is composed of all born again believers. Once the church is resurrected it is called the bride of Christ. When the body of Christ is completed, it will be taken off the earth and the bride will return with Christ to rule and reign with him. Both Jews and Gentiles who are born again form the body of Christ.

ACTS 15:15 "And to this agree the words of the prophets; as it is written," The words of the prophet to which this passage referred was Amos 9:11-12. The passage means there will be Jews and Gentiles in the church and then in the end, Israel will be restored. "After this" refers to after the tribulation is over then Christ will come at the end of the tribulation in his second advent. "I will return" is future tense. It says that the tabernacle will be built again. This is the Millennial Tabernacle and is the one when animal sacrifices will be renewed and is described in the last seven chapters of Ezekiel. The phrase "Which is fallen down" means it was destroyed in the past and is still down. You see the Jews, at this point, are still under the 5th cycle of discipline, but when Jesus returns he will regather the Jews and the discipline will be over. One of the first things Jesus will do when he returns is to regather the Jews and end the 5th cycle of discipline. Then Christ will administer his covenants--the Abrahamic Covenant, the Davidic Covenant, the Palestinian Covenant and the New Covenant. He will build again the city.

ACTS 15:16 "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" This is exactly what will happen and we are to take these words literally just like all the rest of the Bible.

ACTS 15:17 "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." That introduces a purpose clause and means that it is his purpose that the remnant of the Jews will be saved as well as the Gentiles. So this prophecy helps to augment the fact that Gentiles will be saved as well as Jews. Gentiles are indeed included in the body of Christ.

ACTS 15:18 "known unto God are all his works from the beginning of the world." We have a real problem in the translation here. It should read, "Known from eternity (the ultimate source) are all his works". The "Known" is not a verb but a noun and a noun in the neuter gender. "Gnosta" translated here "Know" is the name of a fact which is eternal. With that in mind let us get eight points on this great doctrine of the omniscience of God.

1. God always knew who would be saved and there never was a time when he didn't know. Before the foundation of the world God knew every person who would accept Christ. Of course! God knows all things. God knows the free will of man, and he knows whether man's volition will jump negative or positive. Knowing all this, yet there is no coercing on God's part. Man is free to choose.
2. This is the principle of God's omniscience and the meaning of eternity. Isaiah 45:21 is summarized here.

3. Saved Gentiles are just as much in the plan of God as saved Jews. When a Gentile gets saved he is just as much saved as a saved Jew. Now this was quite a blow to those legalist Jews in Jerusalem. Both Amos 9:11-12 and Isaiah 45:21 make this clear.
4. God's plan was always known to God. God's plan was formulated millions of years ago. Before any man was ever created, God thought about you and made provision for your salvation. Romans 8:29-30 teach this.
5. God is perfect and his plan is perfect.
6. God's provision under this plan is perfect. God provides for everything and this provision is perfect. If you don't take advantage of the perfection God has provided then it is your fault, not his.
7. There never was and there never will be a problem too great for the plan of God.
8. This provision for man was made millions of years before man existed. Ignorance of doctrine and failing to apply it brings your problem.

ACTS 15:19 "Wherefore my sentence is, that we trouble not them, which from among the Gentiles are turned to God" The argument the legalists brought forth is not listed here, only the summary is given. The conclusion was this--"That we not trouble the new Gentile converts with legalism". Then James wrote out the policy and the policy was based on one of the four laws on which believers operate. After a man is saved, which is always by the grace of God, he then operates on the principle of grace. We are saved by grace and we serve by grace. We live by knowledge of the Word of God.

Look at the four laws by which Christians live.

1. THE LAW OF LIBERTY.
When you are filled with the Holy Spirit you have freedom to serve God. When you know Bible doctrine you will know how to serve and you will have freedom in service. Liberty means that acting on the truth of God's Word, you are at liberty to serve and produce divine good. You are not free to do as you please, but free to do as his Word directs and his spirit leads.
2. THE LAW OF LOVE.
This law reaches out toward other believers. There are many things we have a right to do, but we do not do these things because of our love for others. Paul knew that eating meat offered to idols was not wrong, in fact, this was the best meat that was available. But if it offended the conscience of a weaker brother, because of his love for these weaker ones, Paul said he would refrain from eating meat.
3. THE LAW OF SUPREME SACRIFICE.
This is a law directed toward God. An illustration is marriage. It is legitimate for a man to get married. It is a part of the plan of God. But sometimes there comes a time when it is not good for a man to get married, as in the case of Paul. In 1 Corinthians 9 Paul speaks about the fact that he had a right to lead around a wife just like Simon Peter, but he didn't do it because of the type of work Christ called him to do. To fulfill his calling he had to make this sacrifice.

4. THE LAW OF EXPEDIENCY.

This is a fourth law under which Christians operate and it is directed toward unbelievers. There were large colonies of Jews spread out over the Roman Empire. In order for saved Gentiles to reach these unsaved Jews there were certain things they could not do for expediency. This is the law which was in operation here at the Jerusalem conference.

Notice four conclusions from the Jerusalem conference based on the law of expediency.

1. Refrain from idolatry.

The defilement of idols was a big problem in their time and the best way to avoid trouble in the future was to refrain from the use of idols in worship.

2. Not Commit Fornication.

This described the activity of unsaved people who went to the heathen temples and as a part of their worship, they engaged in sexual activity. This was a part of their pagan religious worship. This clearly was immorality and is to have no place in Christian worship.

3. Refrain from contaminated food.

When animals were killed, if they were to be eaten, they had to have the blood drained out of them. We follow this practice today in the slaughter of animals. So this was a reference to the eating of impure food.

4. Bloods

This referred to murder. In that time if someone killed a member of your family, then you were to kill a member of their family. It was blood for blood. This simply stated that murder of any kind was wrong.

The Jerusalem conference simply said, that for the reason of expediency, and for the reason that Gentiles could not reach unsaved Jews if they did these things, then let them refrain from these things on the basis of expediency.

ACTS 15:21 "For Moses of old time hath in every city them that preach him, being read in the synagogues every sabbath day." You see, the Mosaic Law was read in the Jewish synagogues each Sabbath and the Jews had very high morality standards. So if Gentiles didn't observe the basic moral standards held by the Jews, if a Gentile tried to win an unsaved Jew they would simply say, "Look at your conduct. I'm just as good as you are. Don't try to convert me until you clean up your own life".

ACTS 15:22 "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 surnamed Barsabas, and Silas, chief men among the brethren:" So Judas and Silas were chosen to go back to Antioch as official representatives of the Jerusalem Church. In this way they could confirm the report that Paul and Barnabas would take back with them. This follows the idea "In the mouth of two witnesses it can be established". Both Judas Barsabas and Silas had the gift of prophecy (we learn this from verses 27 and 32). Later on Silas would become the companion of Paul on his Second Missionary Journey. The apostles, the preachers, and the church membership all joined in voting on the polity and approved it.

Let us read again the polity letter as it is given here in verses 23-29.

ACTS 15:23-29 "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, Ye 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. For it seemed good to the Holy Ghost, and to us, 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, and from fornication: from which if ye keep yourselves, ye shall do well. Fare ye well." There isn't too much to be added to this statement. Their conclusions were clear and to the point.

In verse 29, rather than the words, "Ye shall do well" the Greek says, "You shall become strong".

So a policy was established. Grace had won the day over legalism. Paul and Barnabas could now go out and tell the Gentile world that they were just as much a part of the plan of God as were the Jews. Even the Jerusalem Jews had agreed to this.