

EXPOSITION OF ACTS

Message #33

Acts 15:12-21

This week, I read a speech that was given in New York by Geert Wilders, who is a member of the Dutch Parliament and Chairman of the Party for Freedom in the Netherlands. The speech was chilling. In the speech he said that Europe is becoming dominated by Muslims and that the United States is the “last bastion of Western Civilization.” He also said “in every European city there are plans to build super-mosques that will dwarf every church in the region.” What this is doing in Europe is creating a hatred for Israel. In his speech he said “Jews are fleeing France in record numbers, on the run for the worst wave of anti-Semitism since World War II.” The speech was very factual, but Mr. Wilders made a slight theological mistake. He assumed that the possibility existed for “the end of Israel.”

You can start reading the Bible at the book of Genesis and you can read straight through it all the way to Revelation, and you will discover Israel is in existence because Israel is a vital nation to God. Israel is the “apple of God’s eye” and one day the whole world will acknowledge that.

Now what happens here in Acts is important. Let us remember our context. Paul and Barnabas were in Jerusalem defending the grace Gospel that they had taken to the Gentile world. Jerusalem was Barnabas’s home church. In fact, you will notice that in **Acts 15:12**, this is a very rare moment when Barnabas is actually mentioned before Paul. Barnabas was the man who first introduced Paul to this church as a believer (Acts 9:27), and Barnabas had been a key man from the church of Jerusalem who had been sent by this church to Antioch (Acts 11:22) in order to see what had happened there. So Barnabas had top billing in this church of Jerusalem.

Paul and Barnabas had returned to Antioch from their first trip into Gentile land to give them a report of all God had done in the Gentile world. They had been traveling through Gentile regions preaching that any who believe on Jesus Christ could be justified from all things and have all sins forgiven (Acts 13:38-39). As they were giving this report, certain men from Judea had traveled 300 miles to Antioch and infiltrated the church and started telling believers that to truly be saved they had to be circumcised and also keep the law of Moses (Acts 15:1, 5).

In the Old Testament, when a Jewish male was born he was circumcised. In fact, most are to this day. However, he was not circumcised so that he might be saved; he was circumcised to identify himself with the covenant people of God. He was already an Israelite by birth, but circumcision identified him as an Israelite. If a Gentile man wanted to be connected to covenant Israel in the O.T. he had to be circumcised. Now that the Gospel of God was moving out to Gentiles, there were those rigid legalistic Jews who were saying that is what they still needed to do. They did not realize that God’s program had moved from Law to Grace, from O.T. to N.T., from Moses to Jesus Christ.

So a meeting was held with the apostles and elders in the church of Jerusalem to consider this matter. The Jews thought they had a special relationship with God that no one else had, and now it would appear as if God’s program was offered to anyone no matter who they were.

To further complicate things in Jerusalem the Apostle Peter stood up and agreed with the grace message Paul and Barnabas were proclaiming (**Acts 15:12**). James Montgomery Boice once said “The hardest of all ideas for human beings to grasp is the doctrine of salvation by grace alone. This is because we all always want to add something to it. If a person is trying to add anything to the work of Christ for salvation, that person is not saved and is operating under a fatal misunderstanding” (*Acts*, p. 259). This is doubly hard for a Jew.

Now keep in mind that all of this is happening in Jerusalem and Jerusalem was a city filled with Jews. Now the Jews were confused. If it is true that God’s program of grace has now moved out to Gentiles, what about Israel? What will happen to all of the promises God gave to Israel? What about Israel’s Promised Land? What about Israel’s promised Righteous King who will rule the world from Jerusalem? What about the fact that Israel was supposed to be esteemed as the nation of God? This text is extremely important for it affirms and confirms a very key biblical truth:

THE GENTILE PROGRAM AND THE GRACE GOSPEL IS FULLY CONSISTENT WITH THE PROGRAM OF GOD, AND AFTER THE GENTILE PROGRAM IS COMPLETE GOD WILL FINISH HIS PROGRAM WITH ISRAEL .

The biggest danger today is not whether or not Gentiles are included in the program of God; the biggest danger today is forgetting that Israel is in the program of God. The church has not replaced Israel. Replacement theology is a false heresy. This council meeting in Jerusalem is very clear to point that out.

Verse 13 says that after Paul and Barnabas and Peter had stopped speaking, James, the half-brother of the Lord, stood up to make a statement.

Jerusalem Council Message Fact #1 - James asks the brethren to listen to him. 15:13b

James was a very unusual Jewish apostle and he became a very important man in the church of Jerusalem. Now this James was the son of Mary, the mother of Jesus, and he was the half-brother of Jesus Christ. This James was the one to whom Jesus Christ paid a personal resurrection visit (I Cor. 15:7). He is often called James the Just because of his rigid piety. He was one of the pillars of the church (Gal. 1:19; 2:9), but he apparently had some rigid tendencies.

Historical tradition says that this James was thrown off the Temple at the end of his life and clubbed to death, and when the church went to bury him they discovered that his knees were so callused, like those of a camel, because of the many hours he spent in prayer. Can you imagine praying so much that you develop calluses on your knees? If you examined my knees you wouldn’t find any calluses. That is not to say we do not kneel down to pray, but we certainly are not a prayer warrior to the extent of James.

When James said that he wanted the entire Church to listen to him, I am certain that you could have heard a pin drop. Actually what the Greek text says is “men brothers you listen to me.” The verb “you listen” is an imperative, which means it is a command.

So James forcefully commands this church to listen to him. James is speaking very authoritatively here.

Since James had been somewhat of a legalistic Jew, we may be relatively certain that the rigid Pharisees thought now we are really getting somewhere.

If James took a stand for God's grace and the Gentiles, it would, as William Barclay said, mean "all was well" (*The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 115).

Jerusalem Council Message Fact #2 - James reminds them of Simeon's testimony. 15:14

The question plaguing these Jerusalem believers, who are mostly Jewish, is how the program of God with Israel relates to these Gentiles. It is interesting that James does not refer to the two men (Paul and Barnabas) who really took the grace Gospel to the Gentiles, but instead he gets all the people in the Jerusalem church to look to Peter. James refers back to the episode with Cornelius and reminded them that this was a major turning point in God's salvation history.

It is important to see that James calls Peter by his Jewish name Simeon. By the way, as one writer says, he does not call Peter "your holiness." He does not describe him as the bishop of Rome or pope of the world; he calls him Simeon. Peter was not some holier than thou religious icon that demanded people kiss his ring or feet; he was a Jewish man who had been touched by the grace of God. By James referring to Peter by the name Simeon, it would remind them that Peter was also Jewish and had already been involved in the Gentile world evangelism (Acts 10).

Simeon's personal testimony was that which confirmed the fact that the program of God, which is designed for Israel, included Him calling out a Gentile people for His name. It also meant that O.T. legal Law was over. We may remember that God had revealed to Peter that all O.T. dietary restrictions were over and that he was no longer under the O.T. Law (Acts 10:10-16). This was a major turning point in the program of God. The program of God had moved from Law to Grace, from Jew to Gentile, from Jerusalem to the world. James says what is happening is fully consistent with what was revealed to Peter. God's grace is moving in the Gentile world and God is calling out a people for His name.

The theology of James in **verse 14** is most interesting here because he clearly emphasizes that it is God who is doing the calling. It is God who is doing the saving.

The Greek stresses that God, Himself, is the one who decided to visit the Gentiles and call out a people. The verb "take from" is middle voice which means God, in and of Himself is completely responsible for the action. This particular verb "take from" (*επισκεπτομαι*) carries with it the idea of God making a decision to pay a visit to Gentile people who are sick and afflicted in sin and were heading to punishment, and He decided to help them and care for them (G. Abbott-Smith, *Greek Lexicon*, p. 173).

So James is completely acknowledging that the saving of Gentiles is not only consistent with God's program, but God is the One performing the action.

Dr. Swindoll said this grace Gentile program is not some “man-activated movement,” it is a movement masterminded by God (*Acts*, Vol. 2, p. 14).

Jerusalem Message Fact #3 - James states that this is all consistent with God’s prophetic Word. **15:15-18**

What James is going to do here is to show them that God’s program with Israel is critical; however, not at this time.

Now the quotation that James uses to prove his point is taken from Amos 9:11-15 and Jeremiah 12:15. I want us to turn back to Amos 9:11 because there is something we need to see. First of all, notice that **Acts 15:16** begins with the prepositional phrase “after these things” (μετα ταυτα). Now when we turn back to Amos 9:11 we discover that both the Hebrew text, and the Greek Septuagint and the English Bibles (NASV, KJV, NIV) begin with the prepositional phrase “in that day.” This is important to observe in understanding the very word James uses.

James uses a slightly different prepositional phrase because he is speaking concerning the Church Age; specifically, “after the Church Age is over,” and Amos uses a different phrase because he is writing concerning Israel in that day when the program of God swings back to Israel. If we combine the two statements we learn powerful doctrine here. **After the Church Age is over, God is going to have a day when He will send His program back to Israel.**

So what James is doing here is placing the program of God with Gentiles on the same level of significance as the program of God with Jews. They are just in different time zones. James said the program of God has swung to the Gentiles, and after it is over it will swing back again to Israel. At that time, the temple of David will be rebuilt and the nation Israel will be restored to a wonderful relationship with God. **Notice carefully the program of God with Israel zeroes in on “the tabernacle of David,” which will be the Temple in Jerusalem.**

It would certainly appear from verse 16 that the Temple of Jerusalem will not be rebuilt until after the Rapture of the Church. The Rapture will end the time when God stops calling out Gentiles for His name and swings the program back to Israel. So it is possible that the Temple will be rebuilt shortly after the Rapture. But it will be the Second Coming of Jesus Christ that will actually restore proper worship. At that time, all of mankind, Jews and Gentiles will seek the Lord, who will be in Person in Jerusalem.

In other words, God’s program consists of two different kinds of peoples; Jews and Gentiles. There is a program for Israel and there is a program for the Church. Once the church program is over, the program of God is headed back to Israel again, and the day of her judicial blindness will be over.

Before we move on we want to make a point about “verbal inspiration.” We believe that the Bible is inspired to the very word (verbal inspiration). What that means is we believe every word, whether it is a noun, pronoun, adjective, adverb, verb, preposition or particle is inspired by God. We believe verb tenses, coordinate clauses, subordinate clauses are all inspired by God. Here is one place where you see the importance of a prepositional phrase. One says “after these things” and another says “in that day” and these words form critical eschatology.

Jerusalem Message Fact #4 - James concludes his message with an application for Jews and Gentiles. **15:19-20**

There are two main applications that James makes here:

Application #1 - Jews should not trouble the Gentiles with circumcision or law. **15:19**

The conclusion of James is that the basis of grace has nothing to do with O.T. Law. Circumcision or O.T. Laws have nothing to do with grace. We are saved by the grace of God. We are not saved by works, or by merit, or by circumcision, or by trying to keep the Law. We are saved by the grace of God. Believe in Jesus Christ and you are justified from all things. All sin is gone.

Religious legalists have no right to heap their legal codes upon people. They have no right to lay their laws on the backs of Gentiles. You have a right to your own convictions, but you do not have the right to put your convictions onto someone else.

Application #2 - Gentiles should stay away from certain things if they want to fellowship with Jews. **15:20-21**

One writer said the mandate given by James to Gentiles is a mandate of no idolatry, no immorality, no eating strangled animals and no eating bloody meat. Now when you read this verse it almost seems that this is some form of works being mixed into grace, until you see the “for” which begins **verse 21**.

The “for” of **verse 21** explains why James is putting these restrictions on the Gentiles. Jewish synagogues existed in almost every Gentile city and the Law of Moses was read and so if there was to be fellowship between the two groups, Jews and Gentiles, he felt that these were reasonable mandates that Gentiles should practically implement. This would give the Gentile believers an opportunity to present grace to the Jews.

When you attend a Bible college or seminary, there are often some rules you have to follow which you cannot necessarily find in the Bible, but you must follow them if you expect to have fellowship with the people of the school. There is nothing wrong with that if you are not making this a matter of salvation. That is what James is doing here.

This had nothing to do with grace salvation. It appears as though that **James is setting forth what the Gentiles should do if they were to have fellowship with Jews at synagogues, which were pretty much in every city.**

You did not have a bunch of churches in a city, but there were synagogues and James says here are the principles Gentiles should apply to fellowship with and evangelize Israel. **Notice he does not say they need to be circumcised, which is the thing that started this whole argument, nor does he say they should keep the O.T. Law.**

He said my judgment is if Gentiles were to fellowship with Jews, they should stay away from idolatry, from immorality, from eating things strangled and from eating anything with blood. I believe this verse should change the way some of you order your steaks. James is a man who liked his steaks well done; not oozing with red blood.

Sexual immorality was rampant in the Gentile world, just as it is today in our world. The fact is, even Paul would later say to the church that if there is an immoral brother in the church, get him out because we are not to fellowship with him (I Cor. 5:11, 13).

There are many of us here who grew up in very rigid, legalistic homes because our parents or grandparents did not understand grace. Howard Hendricks of Dallas Seminary said he grew up in a home that would not allow one to use nail polish as if it were some legalistic mandate to be right with God. He said to this day he is still scarred emotionally.

Look, this book of Acts is clear. You are saved by grace alone, faith alone, in Christ alone. That was the testimony of Paul and Barnabas, of Peter and of James.