

# The Jerusalem Council

(Acts 15:1-35)

## Introduction

What would you think if I told you that I have a present for you but you can't have it until you clean my whole house? You'd probably think I was kidding, wouldn't you! When you have a birthday party and people bring you gifts, do you have to pay them for your gifts? No!

If you had to do something like pay some money or perform a task, or do a trick, or dance a jig to get your birthday present, it wouldn't be a gift, would it? A true gift is free, isn't it?

In the same way, God has given each one of us a gift and it is completely free. We can't work for it and we can't buy it from Him. He freely offers it to us and when we accept His gift, He doesn't take it back.

Do you know what I'm talking about? Jesus offers us eternal life. He came and died in our place on the cross and offers us the free gift of salvation. Anyone who believes that Jesus took the punishment they deserve, receives His gift of salvation by faith and is saved from eternal punishment for their sins and will live in heaven with Jesus when their life on earth is over.

## Opening Prayer

Father, Thank You for Your gift of salvation. Thank You that it is completely free. I don't have to pay for it or work for it. You are so generous with us. We want to give You all the honor and glory You deserve. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

## Memory Verse

*For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, (9) not a result of works, so that no one may boast. (Ephesians 2:8-9)*

## Lesson

As we have been on this journey through the book of Acts, we have seen many examples of how the Holy Spirit has empowered believers to have boldness as they shared the Good News wherever they went.

We have also seen how God's enemy, Satan, hates it when people are saved by their faith in what Jesus did for them. And, he does everything he can to discourage believers from following Jesus.

What are some examples you can remember of how Satan tried to stop the spread of the Gospel?

- Stoning of Stephen.
- Saul persecuting the church before he became a believer himself.
- Apostles imprisoned

Satan thought he could stop God's work, but he was not successful.

In our last few lessons, we heard about events that happened on Paul and Barnabas' first missionary journey. Can you think of any examples where Satan stirred up trouble for them?

- On the island of Cyprus, Bar-Jesus, a Jewish sorcerer and false prophet who was empowered by the evil one, tried to keep the people from believing in Jesus.
- In Pisidian Antioch, unbelieving Jews stirred up trouble for Paul and Barnabas and kicked them out of their city!
- In Iconium, unbelieving Jews poisoned the minds of the Gentiles against Paul and Barnabas.
- In Lystra, Paul was stoned and dragged out of the city as dead.

These are all examples of enemies from outside the church (the believers of Christ) trying to stop the Good News from spreading.

Satan's plans to persecute the followers of Jesus were not working and this made him angry. So, he came up with a new plan. He decided to stir up trouble among the believers, inside the church.

At the end of Paul and Barnabas' first missionary trip, they returned to Antioch of Syria. One day a group of Christians from Jerusalem came to Antioch and began to teach the believers there that they were doing things all wrong.

Acts 15:1

*Some men came down from Judea and began to teach the brothers: "Unless you are circumcised according to the law handed down by Moses, you cannot be saved."*

These were Christian men that came from Jerusalem.

**Ask:** What did these men tell the believers in Antioch? (They needed to be circumcised to be saved.)

They were saying that faith in Jesus was not enough. They were saying that these Gentile believers also had to keep the Law of Moses, just like the Jews. Paul and Barnabas strongly disagreed with them.

Acts 15:2

*Because this brought about a serious argument and debate between Paul and Barnabas and these men, they appointed Paul and Barnabas and some other men from the church to go up to Jerusalem, to see the apostles and the elders **concerning this controversy.***

This upset the believers in Antioch so much they decided to send Paul and Barnabas to Jerusalem to speak with the leaders of the church there.

It was hard for Jewish believers to accept Gentiles in the family of God. (The Gentiles were all the people who were not Jewish.)

You have to understand that at first the church was made up almost entirely of Jewish people. After all, Jesus Himself was a Jew. Jews thought the only way Gentiles could be right with God was to obey all the Jewish laws. This included *circumcision*. Circumcision is a surgical procedure done to Jewish boys at birth to mark them as a member of God's family.

[Teacher, at birth, boys have skin that covers the end of their penis, called the foreskin. Circumcision surgically removes the foreskin.]

So, these Jewish believers that came to Antioch from Jerusalem thought that the Gentile believers needed to be circumcised to be right with God. This caused a big disagreement among the believers.

Paul argued that these Jewish believers were trying to add to the message of the cross saying you have to perform a surgical procedure to be pleasing to God.

To say that believers needed to be circumcised was to say that what Jesus did on the cross was not enough; that we have to do more to be saved from our sins besides trust in Jesus. But the truth is we are saved by our faith in what Jesus did for us. [Review verse for today.]

Paul and Barnabas strongly disagreed with these Jewish believers from Jerusalem so they went to Jerusalem to meet with the church leaders there so they could settle this issue.

Acts 15:4-5

*When they arrived in Jerusalem, Barnabas and Paul were welcomed by the whole church, including the apostles and elders. They reported everything God had done through them. (5) But then some of the believers who belonged to the sect of the Pharisees stood up and insisted, "The **Gentile converts must be circumcised and required to follow the law of Moses.**"*

The Pharisees were like policemen; they insisted that people follow Law. So, when some of the Pharisees became Christians (like Nicodemus), it was hard for them to not insist that all believers had to follow the Law of Moses. This was a new idea for them.

Satan doesn't care how he destroys God's work. If he can get believers to argue and fight with each other, it keeps their focus off the goodness of God.

This meeting could have turned ugly. But because Paul and Barnabas and the church leaders were all filled with the Holy Spirit, they had God's wisdom and guidance.

Acts 15:6-9

*So the apostles and elders met together to resolve this issue. (7) At the meeting, after a long discussion, Peter stood and addressed them as follows: "Brothers, you all know that God chose me from among you some time ago to preach to the Gentiles so that they could hear the Good News and believe. (8) God knows people's hearts, and he confirmed that he accepts Gentiles by giving them the Holy Spirit, just as he did to us. (9) He made no distinction between us and them, for he cleansed their hearts through faith.*

This meeting in Jerusalem could have turned into a fighting match where people shouted at each other. But that's not what happened. Each person at the meeting spoke with respect and honor.

After much discussion Peter stood up and began to share his personal experience of how God brought salvation to Gentiles when they believed in their hearts that Jesus was truly the Savior of the whole world. [When Peter went to Cornelius' home.]

Peter knew how hard it was to obey God's laws so he asked a very interesting question.

Acts 15:10

*So why are you now challenging God by burdening the Gentile believers with a yoke that neither we nor our ancestors were able to bear?*

Peter was saying, "You know it's impossible for us to keep all the commandments of God perfectly. Why are you trying to make the Gentiles keep rules that none of us can keep?"

Then Peter reminds them that all people, whether Jew or Gentile, are saved by the grace of God, not by anything we do or don't do.

Acts 15:11

*We believe that we are all saved the same way, by the undeserved grace of the Lord Jesus."*

[Review today's verse.]

After Peter spoke, Paul and Barnabas shared their experiences on their 1<sup>st</sup> missionary journey. They had witnessed God's acceptance of Gentiles into His family in every town they visited.

Acts 15:12

*The whole assembly fell silent and listened to Barnabas and Paul, who reported all the signs and wonders God had done among the Gentiles through them.*

They all agreed that the Jewish believers should not try to make it difficult for Gentiles to come to God. So, they decided the best way to deal with this issue was to write a letter to make their decisions clear:

- The Gentile believers were to respect Jewish traditions, such as their dietary laws. (Remember, Jews were not allowed to eat anything from a pig—no bacon or pork chops.) Likewise,
- The Jewish believers were to honor the Gentiles and accept them without requiring them to keep the Law of Moses. In other words, they could go ahead and have ham sandwiches for lunch.

Paul and Barnabas along with some other believers from Jerusalem, took the letter back to Antioch and read it to the believers there.

Acts 15:31

*The people read it and rejoiced over its encouraging message.*

When the believers in Antioch heard the message, they were encouraged. The problem that had troubled them had been solved. They did not need to do anything else to be saved, just believe that what Jesus did on the cross paid for their sins.

Once again God's enemy, Satan, did not succeed in his plans to disrupt the church. The Holy Spirit enabled the believers to handle this disagreement with wisdom and respect.

In this lesson we learned that when Satan saw that when he caused persecution of the church from the outside didn't stop the powerful message of the cross, he turned his attention to starting arguments inside the church. Satan brought false teachers into the church and that caused the people to argue with each other. But that didn't stop the work of God, either! By the power of the Holy Spirit the people were able to solve their disagreement and the work of God continued on.

## CLOSING PRAYER

Father, Thank You that by the power of the Holy Spirit, You give us the wisdom we need to solve disagreements with others with love and respect. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

## LEARNING ACTIVITIES

### GAME CENTER

#### *Marbles*

**Preparation:** Create a 24" dartboard for a floor game with three circles. Note: it works best if you use fabric like felt so the marbles don't roll so fast. Make the bullseye an 8" circle and the secondary circle 16". Label the bullseye, "10 points", the middle circle "20 points", the outer circle "50 points", and label the area off the dartboard as "100 points."



Place some marbles in the center of the dartboard on the bullseye. Use another marble as the "shooter."

**Play:** After correctly answering a review question, the player uses his thumb to flick the "shooter" from the edge of the dartboard into the bullseye to scatter the marbles placed there.

After each turn, add up the points based on where the marbles have rolled. Then gather the marbles and return them to the bullseye for the next person to scatter.

Or, use the following questions in another game or discussion.

1. What is an example of how Satan tried to stop the spread of the Gospel?
2. Who came to the church in Antioch? (Christians from Jerusalem.)
3. What did the men from Jerusalem tell the believers in Antioch that they needed to do to be saved? (They needed to be circumcised.)
4. Why was it wrong for these men from Jerusalem to tell the believers in Antioch that they needed to be circumcised? (They were saying that faith in Jesus was not enough.)
5. Why was it hard for the Jewish believers to accept Gentiles into the church? (The Jews had been brought up to think they were better than the Gentiles. Also, it was hard *not* to insist that all believers had to follow the Law.)
6. How did Paul and Barnabas respond to the message these men from Jerusalem bought? (They strongly disagreed with it.)
7. Where did Paul and Barnabas go and why? (They went to Jerusalem to discuss this teaching with the church leaders in Jerusalem.)
8. Tell me in your own words, what happened at the meeting in Jerusalem.

9. What did they decide to do about this problem? (They wrote a letter asking the Gentile believers to respect the traditions of the Jewish believers and telling the Jews to honor the Gentiles.)
10. When the believers in Antioch received the letter, how did they respond? (They were encouraged.)
11. What does a person need to do to be saved? (Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ.)
12. Why is it wrong to expect someone to keep the Law of Moses? (That is saying that what Jesus did on the cross was not enough.)

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