

The Jerusalem Council

(Acts 15:1-35)

Pre-Session Warm Up

When you have a birthday party and people bring you gifts, do you have to pay them for your gifts? No! 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!

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.

From each of these examples we have seen enemies from outside the church (the believers of Christ) try to stop the Good News from spreading.

This made Satan angry. His plans to persecute the followers of Jesus were not working. So, he came up with a new plan. He decided to stir up strife among the believers, inside the church.

At the end of Paul and Barnabas' first missionary trip, they returned to Antioch of Syria and reported all that God had done through them. There they stayed with the disciples for a long time.

One day a group of men from Judea traveled 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."

Ask: Who came to the church in Antioch? (Men from Judea.)

Ask: What did the men from Judea tell the believers in Antioch that they needed to do to be saved? (They needed to be circumcised.)

You see, the men from Judea were saying that faith in Jesus was not enough. They were saying that the new 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.

Ask: Where did Paul and Barnabas go? (Jerusalem)

Ask: Why did they go to Jerusalem? (Paul and Barnabas went to Jerusalem to discuss this teaching with the church leaders in Jerusalem.)

To understand what is happening we have to understand that at first the early church was made up of Jewish people. Jesus Himself was a Jew. Because these Jews came to realize that Jesus was God's promised Messiah, they had become the very first Christ-followers, or Christians.

None of these Jewish believers fully understood that God's plan all along was to include Gentiles in the family of God. (The Gentiles were all the people who were not Jewish.)

The Jews knew themselves as "God's Chosen People". But they did not understand that they had been chosen by God to teach the Gentiles about Him. Instead, the Jews thought that because they were God's "Chosen People", that made them better than the Gentiles, so they treated Gentiles as if they were unclean and unworthy to worship God.

They thought that if the Gentiles wanted to worship the One True God that the Jews worshiped, they had to become Jews. They believed that the only way Gentiles could be right with God was to obey all the Jewish laws. This included *circumcision*. Circumcision is a surgical procedure that Jewish boys have done at birth that marks 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.]

God told Abraham to circumcise all the men and boys in his family line so everyone could tell they were children of Abraham. To this day, this procedure is done to most newborn baby boys.

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

Satan saw that enemies from outside could not slow down and stop the powerful message of the Gospel. Now he turned his attention to attacking inside the church. His plan of attack was to bring false teaching to new believers.

These Jews who had arrived in Antioch of Syria from Judea were trying to add to the message of the Gospel. The Good News is that by faith in Jesus alone a person is made right with God. Salvation is a free gift. Jesus paid the price for us to be made right with God. He

went to the cross and gave His life for us. He was buried and on the third day He rose from the dead, alive!

We can do nothing to earn forgiveness for our sins. 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. 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 Jews from Judea so they decided to go to Jerusalem and meet with the church leaders there.

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 the Jewish religious leaders who made extra rules for the people to obey so they could please God.

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 of 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.

The meeting in Jerusalem was being conducted with respect and honor to each person that spoke. This could have turned into a fighting match where people were shouting at each other. But that's not what happened.

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

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, is 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 as they traveled and shared the Good News. They had witnessed God's acceptance of Gentiles into His family when they put their faith in Jesus.

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 believes 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 send a letter to the Gentile believers and ask them to respect Jewish traditions, but to assure them they were not required to keep the traditions themselves. For example, the law of Moses required Jews to eat a strict diet. For example, they could not eat anything from a pig, like bacon or pork chops.

Likewise, in the letter they would assure the Gentile believers that the Jews would honor the Gentiles and accept them without requiring them to keep the law of Moses.

Paul and Barnabas along with some other believes 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.

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

Use the following questions in a game or discussion.

1. Who came to the church in Antioch? (Men from Judea.)
2. What did the men from Judea tell the believers in Antioch that they needed to do to be saved? (They needed to be circumcised.)
3. How did Paul and Barnabas respond to the message these men from Judea bought? (They strongly disagreed with it.)
4. Where did Paul and Barnabas go? (Jerusalem)
5. Why did they go to Jerusalem? (Paul and Barnabas went to Jerusalem to discuss this teaching with the church leaders in Jerusalem.)
6. Tell me in your own words, what happened at the meeting in Jerusalem.
7. What did they decide to do about this problem? (They wrote a letter asking the Gentiles to respect the Jew's traditions and telling the Jews to respect the Gentiles.)
8. When the believers in Antioch received the letter, how did they respond? (They were encouraged.)
9. What does a person need to do to be saved? (Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ.)