

**STUDY NOTES: Lesson 6: Acts 15, 16, 17**

*Wherefore, my beloved brethren, reconcile yourselves to the will of God, and not to the will of the devil and the flesh; and remember, after ye are reconciled unto God, that It is only in and through the grace of God that ye are saved.*  
2 Nephi 10:24

**CULTURE CLASH: ACTS 15**

Chapter 15 of Acts tells about an important conference known as The Jerusalem Council. This was a meeting of leaders in the church from Jerusalem with some apostles who were present to decide a critical question to the new faith. Would Gentile converts have to convert to the Jewish faith by the ordinance of circumcision to become Christian? Related to this is the unspoken question: Is Paul's direct missionary outreach to Gentiles legitimate? The first Jewish converts did not see themselves as having left Judaism at all. They were Jews who now believed that Jesus Christ was the Messiah promised by their own prophets. Jerusalem seemed the center of their religious world and was considered by all Christians to be the headquarters of Christianity. It was the missionary activity of Paul and Barnabas that forced the issue to the fore.

Those who battled over this looming question had no inkling that in approximately twenty years Jerusalem would be a pile of rubble, the temple destroyed, with not a single resident Jew or Christian left in the city. A war with Rome was soon to wipe it out. The church was *not* destined to be run from Jerusalem, as all assumed. History is one thing when you are looking back on it, and quite another when in the middle of it, riding the wave. Like someone investing in a carriage factory the year Henry Ford began making Model T's, the Jewish idea of the meaning of Christ was on the way out. The wave of the future was a theology or gospel understanding built on the grace of God through faith in Jesus Christ. As it turned out, the Law of Moses with all its performances, rituals, feasts, and sacrifices, was fading away since all of those things had been only types and shadows of the reality of Christ's atonement.

**THE CONFLICT**

Circumcision itself was a type for something. Taken alone, it had no saving power. But it stood for something else that did have saving power. To the Jews it represented the covenants they had made with the God of Israel. It had been a symbol of the covenant relationship with God ever since Abraham was commanded to do this. This made it very hard for them to leave behind for it felt as if they were abandoning their covenants. The Lord had prepared for them and for all mankind a NEW covenant to take the place of circumcision but they did not see that.

Back in Old Testament times He had told the prophets that He would send a new covenant. Jeremiah 31:31-33 says "Behold, the days come, saith the LORD, that I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel, and with the house of Judah: Not according to the covenant that I made with their fathers in the day that I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt; which my covenant they brake, although I was an husband unto them, saith the LORD: But this shall be the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel; After those days, saith the LORD, I will put my law in their inward parts, and write it in their hearts; and will be their God, and they shall be my people."

Ezekiel had also referred to the coming of the new covenant between God and man. In Ezekiel 36:26-27 we read, "A new heart also will I give you, and a new spirit will I put within you: and I will take away the stony heart out of your flesh, and I will give you an heart of flesh. And I will put my spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes, and ye shall keep my judgments, and do them."

The Jews did not see that circumcision was only a symbol. They did not look deeply enough into what it had to teach them. If you study the symbolism of circumcision you can learn essential truths about God's redemptive plan. For example: Circumcision was a 'breaking' of the flesh, and among God's people, Israel, it was through this broken flesh that new life came into being (babies were born). To be born into the family of the Lord's covenant people you (or the seed that became you) had to come through this broken flesh. This physical

broken flesh was a picture of spiritual brokenness of heart, or the necessary repentant and humble frame of mind for a believer to have. In other words, it is through a broken and contrite heart that new spiritual life comes and new Christians are 'born again' and become part of the community of covenant Israel.

While these distinctions between Old Testament [Covenant] Israel and New Testament [Covenant] Israel had not yet been fully grasped by those in attendance at the Jerusalem Council, one thing *was* clear to the church leaders. The Gentiles had been receiving the "new life" that came with the gift of the Holy Ghost. There was no doubt of this since the proof was plainly manifest in the gifts of the spirit and the signs and miracles that followed. No one could deny that God was at work among this group of people. The Jerusalem church would have to decide on a response.

Luke's account of the council tells of "much disputing," Peter's address, speeches by Paul and Barnabus recounting their miraculous mission experiences among the Gentiles, and, finally, a summing up speech by James, who seems to have been the leader of the local Jewish Christian congregations in Jerusalem. By virtue of his relationship to the Savior (he was His brother) and his reputation as a very pious, righteous man, (called James the Just) he was respected by all parties and thus was a natural to serve as a spokesperson for this question.

James uses a scripture from Amos (9:11-12) to make his point that the coming of Gentile congregations into Israel was foretold by prophecy. He seems to suggest that the Gentiles be seen as inhabiting a larger circle drawn around the smaller circle of Jewish Christianity. The Gentiles did not need to enter the smaller inside circle to be Christians. They were all Christians. And neither did the Jews have to give up their Jewishness. They would all co-exist in God's plan.

### **MINIMUM REQUIREMENTS**

The Jerusalem Council decides to "lay upon [the Gentiles] no greater burden than these necessary things." (Acts 15:28) The list is designed to make it possible for the Gentile Christian community and the Jewish Christian community to co-exist. Certain things that were deep-seated cultural taboos to the Jews would now be forbidden also to the Gentiles. These included a prohibition against eating meat offered to idols before being sold or eating meat with the blood in it ("things strangled") and eating blood in any other form. By thus keeping "kosher" (loosely interpreted) with the Jewish Christians, the two groups would be able to share meals together. Imagine the difficulties in a ward if different groups within it had opposing dietary codes.

The other prohibition had nothing to do with dietary codes, but with sexual purity. This acknowledged that the Gentiles were coming out of a culture much like ours, one of great sexual looseness and sophistication. Temple prostitution was part of the accepted worship at some shrines. Homosexuality was acceptable in Greek culture. The Jewish Christians were insisting that there be no misunderstanding on this point. Even though the surrounding culture may have been ok with such relaxed sexual standards, anyone professing the name of Christ must totally renounce this way of life. But by not imposing any of the other demands of the Mosaic Law—feast days, sacrifices, etc.—they acknowledged that the Gentile Christians did not have to become Jews.

Paul and Barnabus return to Antioch, the city that became their home base, to share with the Christians there the good news of the Jerusalem Council's decision. Acts 15:31 notes that they—the Antioch Christians—"rejoiced for the consolation." The great work that Paul and Barnabus had started could now move forward.

A conflict arose when Paul and Barnabas disagreed over whether to take John Mark with them on their second missionary journey. Paul felt that since John Mark quit on their first trip, he should not be included. Barnabas was Mark's uncle, loved the boy, and wanted to give him another chance. The conflict became sharp, resulting in the two splitting up and going to different geographical areas. What Satan may have felt was a victory, turned to a blessing for the work of God because it doubled the missionary work force. And in the end, John Mark learned much from these life experiences and became a valuable worker in God's kingdom, eventually reconciling with Paul and even becoming the writer of the Gospel of Mark! It is worth remembering for all of us that things aren't over until they're over! (see 2nd Timothy 4:11 )

### **THE OPENING OF THE EUROPEAN MISSION: ACTS 16**

Early in the second mission of Paul, he meets a young man who will become important in his life and ministry—Timothy. The son of a Jewish woman and a Greek father, raised as a Jew, he is an enthusiastic convert to Christianity who joins the missionary team. Surprisingly, in light of Paul's stance against the need for circumcision at the Jerusalem conference, Paul has Timothy circumcised. By doing so Paul legitimizes the young man's Jewishness, which some would have questioned given his Greek father. He will now be regarded as fully Jewish, like Paul, which gives them standing in the Jewish congregations where they go first in every city to begin their missionary work. It was their Jewish credentials that always got their foot in the door. And it was done, not because Paul felt Timothy had spiritual need of this, but simply to prevent opposition to their missionary work.

What is the lesson for us in this? Paul was a brilliant forward thinking person, who had no racial or cultural prejudices in his understanding of Christianity after his conversion. He knew that the message of Christ's redemption was freely given to every person on earth. But he also recognized that others would necessarily come along at their own pace and in terms of their own understanding and traditions. He said, "For though I be free from all men, yet have I made myself servant unto all, that I might gain the more. And unto the Jews I became as a Jew, that I might gain the Jews.... To them that are without law, as without law... that I might gain them that are without law. To the weak became I as weak, that I might gain the weak: I am made all things to all men, that I might by all means save some. And this I do for the gospel's sake...." (1 Corinthians 9:19-23)

Acts 16:6-7 are easy verses to glide past, but in fact they represent approximately 900 miles of walking for Paul, Silas and company! We need to remember when we are reading about Paul's missionary journeys, against what a backdrop of tireless diligence, and hard physical labor this history unfolds. If you have children you might have them pick a spot on a map 900 miles from home and ask them how they would feel about walking (no motels) to that place to bring the message of the gospel! We owe a great debt to these courageous missionaries.

Though Paul had planned to go further into Asia on this mission, he is redirected by a dream to Macedonia, or what is Northern Greece today. And so they set sail from Troas and land in Neapolis, then walk 15 miles inland to the Roman outpost of Philippi. In Troas there is a pronoun shift in Luke's account and "they" becomes "we" and "us." Luke apparently joins the group at this point. Some think they go to Philippi because it is Luke's home. It is different than Paul's past stops because it has a very small Jewish community, too small to have a synagogue. Local Jewish believers are meeting for prayer beside a little river that runs through the area. There Paul meets a remarkable woman named Lydia. She is a businesswoman, has influence in the community and her heart is open to the message of Christ. Her hospitality was a lifeline and great blessing. Providence surely put her in this place at this time in order to help the work move forward.

### **JAILHOUSE ROCK**

In contrast to other cities, opposition to the work does not come from the Jews for they are not an influential part of the Philippian community. Another source of opposition is from those who feel that Paul and the Christian mission threaten their pocketbook. Paul's healing of the demon-possessed girl gets him in trouble with her handlers who complain to city authorities and start uproar in the marketplace. The magistrates seem weak, and are swayed by the clamoring crowd into having Paul and Silas beaten and thrown into prison to teach them a lesson. Paul does not reveal at this time that he is Roman. Perhaps the riot is so tumultuous he cannot be heard. But there is another possibility. The right of a Roman was to appeal to Rome rather than to local courts. Had Paul insisted on this the mission would have ended then and there and he would have had to go to Rome for an appeal. His willingness to suffer this unjust beating meant the mission did not have to be interrupted for legal appeals. What an amazing sacrifice for the gospel's sake!

Finding themselves in a stinking jail, locked into stocks, their backs raw and bleeding from the public whipping they have received, Paul and Silas do something remarkable that goes totally against the natural pull of human nature. They sing praises to God. The natural inclination would have been self-pity or at least indignation over the injustice visited upon them, which is often Satan's subtle means of pulling us into the more dangerous trap of self-pity, that most tempting of mental sins. But they refuse to concentrate their mental energies on their own unfortunate condition; instead they concentrate on the Lord, His greatness and goodness, and raise their voices in hymns of praise. We get some idea of the power inherent in such faith when an earthquake rocks the jail, shaking loose their chains and also shaking the frightened jailer out of a sound sleep, both spiritually and physically. The night ends with the baptism of his whole household. Though Paul reveals his Roman citizenship the next day and leaves town as requested, we may surmise that the jailhouse miracle and conversion of the jailer's family received wide publicity and was helpful in spreading the message, for when Paul returns to Philippi on his next mission there is a substantial branch there, one that remains particularly close to Paul's heart ever after.

Roman citizenship was strong protection in the world of the Roman Empire, chiefly because a citizen had the right of appeal to a trial in Rome rather than be forced to submit to a local government. The fact that Paul enjoyed this protection was an important shield to him during his missionary service and can be considered another of God's providential workings behind the scenes, because this citizenship would necessarily have been granted to one of Paul's forbears and then passed on to him as a birthright. Tarsus, Paul's family home, was a major staging area for the Roman Army in its battles against the Persian Empire. A tent-making family like his might have supplied the army at a critical time and been recognized by a grant of citizenship. Somehow, the Lord provided in Paul's past for the future needs of the Christian mission.

## **THE ROAD TO ATHENS: ACTS 17**

Paul chooses to visit the capital city of Macedonia, Thessalonica, next. This much larger, prosperous city had an active Jewish community and synagogue. Though there were other towns along the way from Philippi, Paul probably felt that the capital was a good place to center missionary work in Macedonia. But in this he was to be disappointed. For the familiar pattern of the Galatian cities is repeated here: that is, Paul begins his missionary efforts in the synagogue but he is rejected by the Jews and so turns to the Gentiles directly. But this inflames Jewish opposition to a fever pitch, forcing Paul and his team to leave quickly and forcing Jason (Greek for Joshua), probably the leading Jewish convert, to post a bond promising the missionaries will not return. Paul later writes to them of wanting to re-visit there but being "prevented by Satan." (1 Thess. 2:18) This probably refers to the standing decree against his preaching there from this incident.

With the bridges in Thessalonica burned behind them, Paul, Silas and Timothy enter the small, rather out of the way town of Berea. The Bereans have become famous for the compliment paid them in verse 11: "These were more noble than those in Thessalonica, in that they received the word with all readiness of mind, and searched the scriptures daily, whether those things were so." A promising work begins but is quickly destroyed by Jews from Thessalonica. To save Paul's life, Timothy and Silas pretend to book him passage to Athens and then secretly send him on the land route to Athens with some local brethren who know the way. He waits for Silas and Timothy to arrive so missionary work can begin there. But the Macedonia of his dream has now been left behind.

## **ADDRESS TO THE AREOPAGUS COUNCIL**

Paul began his mission to Macedonia with high hopes, led by a vision. But he has met with disappointment. As he waited for his associates to arrive, he observed the pagan worship that dominated Athens and debated informally with whoever would listen to him in the synagogue and marketplace. After hearing his ideas for a number of days, they take him before the council known as the Areopagus\*. This was essentially a glorified town council with an illustrious past that Rome allowed to still operate on local matters. Matters of religion were also matters of state. Just as our missionaries cannot preach in foreign countries without permission, the Areopagus wanted to know what message Paul was going to preach in their city. So he is asked to give a summary of what he believes and teaches.

Paul's address to the council is a classic. In keeping with his stated willingness to be "all things to all men," he tailors his approach to his audience. He does not refer to Jewish history or fulfilled scripture. Neither does he talk about the God of nature that sends rain and crops to mankind as he had at Lystra. Rather, he references the "unknown God" from a shrine in the city, and says he wants to explain who this is. This God is the creator of all things, does not live in temples made with hands, and has made all men brothers. He brilliantly uses their own Greek poets to shore up his points. God's history of redemption has been an unfolding one, and the high point of it has now been made known in the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Paul's personal testimony of the resurrection is meant to be convincing proof, but most hearers rejected it with scorn. The idea of an eternal soul would have made sense to them, but the thought that our bodies themselves would live again seemed ludicrous. Paul evidently failed to gain the necessary rights to publicize his views in the city. The council says it is going to hold the matter in abeyance for a while. However he does make a few converts, including one member of the Areopagus, Dionysius. Without hope of an active missionary work in Athens, Paul goes on to the next large city that would have a sizeable number of Jews—Corinth.

We leave Paul here at a low point, perhaps even feeling as if he has largely failed in his efforts. Fortunately we know that great success is right around the corner for our indomitable hero. But Paul's writings let us know something of his mindset in difficult situations. He writes later to the Philippians that it is given to believers "in the behalf of Christ, not only to believe on him, but also to suffer for his sake." (Phil. 1:29) All the negatives Paul dealt with were swallowed up for him in this feeling that his suffering had meaning in the cause of Christ, and thus he had the inner strength, the "peace of God, which passeth all understanding" to "keep his heart and mind through Christ Jesus." (Philippians 4:7)

What a great example he sets for us of faith and devotion to Christ. The Doctrine and Covenants promises that those who are faithful and diligent will be "encircled in the arms of His love. (D&C 6:20)" In our mind's eye we can see a solitary figure trudging along the road from Athens to the next field of battle in the warfare that he tirelessly waged. But this lone man is far from alone. For the Savior and Redeemer of mankind is well aware of the man, and the relationship that the two have is close and deep. Paul was a man "encircled" by the arms of the One he served so well.

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\* The council got its name from the hill next to the building where they met: Mars Hill, or Ares Hill.