International Bible Lessons Commentary
Acts 15:1-12
King James Version

International Bible Lessons
Sunday, November 8, 2015

L.G. Parkhurst, Jr.

The **International Bible Lesson** (*Uniform Sunday School Lessons Series*) for **Sunday, November 8, 2015**, is from **Acts 15:1-12**. **Questions for Discussion and Thinking Further** follow the verse-by-verse *International Bible Lesson Commentary*. **Study Hints for Discussion and Thinking Further** discusses *Questions for Discussion and Thinking Further* to help with class preparation and in conducting class discussion: these hints are available on the *International Bible Lessons Commentary* website along with the *International Bible Lesson* that you may want to read to your class as part of your Bible study. If you are a Bible student or teacher, you can discuss each week's commentary and lesson at the *International Bible Lesson Forum*.

International Bible Lesson Commentary

Acts 15:1-12

(Acts 15:1) And certain men which came down from Judaea taught the brethren, and said, Except ye be circumcised after the manner of Moses, ye cannot be saved.

After Paul and Barnabas returned from their first missionary journey and reported God's work through them to the church, some Jewish Christians came to Antioch, protested, and insisted that to be saved a person must believe in Jesus and also obey the ceremonial laws that God gave Moses. In other words, for a man to be saved he must be circumcised; for men and women to be saved they must first adopt (or also adopt after believing in Jesus) the teachings and practices in the law of Moses. They taught that to be saved a person must also become like the Jews in practice, which included keeping all of the Jewish food laws (keeping kosher).

(Acts 15:2) When therefore Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and disputation with them, they determined that Paul and Barnabas, and certain other of them, should go up to Jerusalem unto the apostles and elders about this question.

The Apostle Peter had been the person God used to lead Cornelius and his Gentile family and friends to faith in the Lord. Paul and Barnabas had been the missionaries God used to lead the Gentiles to faith in Jesus Christ on their

missionary journey. In these cases, the Gentile converts were not also required to become Jews in order to be saved. Therefore, after much debate, Paul, Barnabas, and some other believers were sent to Jerusalem by the church in Antioch to discuss the problem with the apostles and the elders who led the various congregations. In Jerusalem, a Council of apostles and elders would meet and give a solution.

(Acts 15:3) And being brought on their way by the church, they passed through Phenice and Samaria, declaring the conversion of the Gentiles: and they caused great joy unto all the brethren.

Wherever they traveled on their way to Judea and Jerusalem, they stopped at various churches and reported the results of their missionary journey. In these churches, perhaps with some God-fearing Gentiles also attending, there was great rejoicing that more people were coming to faith in Christ. Following the example of Cornelius and his family and friends who were converted during the preaching of Peter, some of the Gentile believers in these churches had not also become Jewish converts in order to be saved Christians. The Holy Spirit came upon and saved believing Gentiles by God's grace through their faith in Jesus Christ, and not because they also obligated themselves to obeying the law of Moses.

(Acts 15:4) And when they were come to Jerusalem, they were received of the church, and of the apostles and elders, and they declared all things that God had done with them.

Barnabas and Paul were welcomed by the whole church in Jerusalem, the apostles that Jesus had called into apostleship, and those of the church had selected as elders. Elders were leaders that were appointed by those who founded churches, perhaps having been selected first by the congregation. Paul and Barnabas appointed elders in the churches they founded on their first missionary journey. Paul and Barnabas reported "all that God had done;" they were God's willing servants through whom God worked, and they gave God all of the glory for all that was accomplished. We see no indication that they talked about everything "they" had done; they only reported what God had done through them.

(Acts 15:5) But there rose up certain of the sect of the Pharisees which believed, saying, That it was needful to circumcise them, and to command them to keep the law of Moses.

Some of those who were Pharisees before becoming Christians (Saul was a Pharisee before becoming the Apostle Paul) were very vocal and able to debate with Paul and Barnabas about how to lead Gentiles to faith in Jesus Christ. They insisted that just as the Jewish Christians

obey the law of Moses, so Gentile Christians must be compelled to obey the law of Moses in order to be a part of the church and to be saved. The focus on circumcision indicates a belief that the ceremonial laws of Moses must be obeyed in order to be a Christian. All Christians are enabled by the Holy Spirit to fulfill the moral law of God, though all Christians are also subject to temptation and sin (to disobeying the moral law of God: the law of love for God and neighbor).

(Acts 15:6) And the apostles and elders came together for to consider of this matter.

The official leaders of the church met to deliberate and decide between Peter, Paul, and Barnabas' practices and teaching and the teaching of the Jewish Christians who believed as the practicing Pharisees in the church believed. Their solution would determine whether or not the church would teach that salvation is by grace through faith in Jesus Christ or salvation is by faith in Jesus Christ plus obeying the law of Moses.

(Acts 15:7) And when there had been much disputing, Peter rose up, and said unto them, Men and brethren, ye know how that a good while ago God made choice among us, that the Gentiles by my mouth should hear the word of the gospel, and believe.

Peter was the first to give evidence of God's work in conversion before the Council of apostles and elders. He emphasized that God made the choice that Gentiles would be saved by hearing the good news of Jesus and believing, not by converting to Judaism plus believing. God chose to do this new work through Peter, an apostle. Jesus had chosen Peter as the first important leader in the church when He said to Peter and the other disciples: "And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it" (Matthew 16:18). The Holy Spirit also inspired Peter to preach the first sermon about Jesus on the Day of Pentecost, when God sent the Holy Spirit upon believers. Peter's experience and message to the Council was of crucial importance in their decision-making.

(Acts 15:8) And God, which knoweth the hearts, bare them witness, giving them the Holy Ghost, even as he did unto us;

God made the choice on how to save the Gentiles. God knows the heart of every person. God knew the heart of Cornelius and his family and friends. God knew when they believed or when they were ready to believe and what they believed. God knew what they willed or wanted to do as they heard the good news of Jesus. God gave them the Holy Spirit without requiring them to pledge their loyalty

to the law of Moses or make a promise that they would be circumcised and obey the law of Moses.

(Acts 15:9) And put no difference between us and them, purifying their hearts by faith.

God knew their hearts' desire, and God knew they believed the good news of Jesus. God cleansed or purified their hearts. He cleansed them from sin. He freed them from bondage to Satan. He freed them from selfishly seeking all the world offers sinners. No longer would an unclean heart drive them to sin against God. By faith in Jesus Christ, they could go to Jesus when tempted to sin and He would help them obey God through the Holy Spirit who indwelt them.

(Acts 15:10) Now therefore why tempt ye God, to put a yoke upon the neck of the disciples, which neither our fathers nor we were able to bear?

Since God had done for them all that needed to be done for their salvation, Peter asked why these Pharisaic Jews wanted to add the yoke of the law to the conscience of these believers. The Jews sometimes referred to the law of Moses as a yoke. Perhaps Jesus considered this Jewish idea when He promised, "Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls" (Matthew 11:29). The Gentiles that Peter, Paul, and Barnabas saw come to saving

faith in Jesus Christ were living as Jesus wanted them to live and bringing glory to God by their faith in and obedience to Jesus as their Lord. They did not need the additional yoke of the law of Moses; they did not need to be circumcised or obey the customs of Moses that the Pharisees wanted them taught as additional rules to obey.

(Acts 15:11) But we believe that through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ we shall be saved, even as they.

Peter emphasized that believers are saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ. By grace, God sent an angel to Cornelius. By grace, Jesus sent Peter to Cornelius and his family, and by grace Jesus sent Paul and Barnabas into the mission field. By grace, many Gentiles believed the good news of Jesus that they preached. By grace, these Gentiles received the Holy Spirit and God saw their hearts. They did not need, nor was it desirable for them to also be compelled, to adopt and obey the law of Moses.

(Acts 15:12) 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.

Peter, Paul, and Barnabas argued from their personal experiences with Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit and what they had observed about the Gentiles' faith in Jesus after they came to trust Jesus as their Savior. They reported the

signs and wonders God did as they shared the good news of Jesus with Gentiles, and how God sent the Holy Spirit upon the Gentiles who believed. They saw the results of the cleansing of Gentile hearts by God and their receiving of the Holy Spirit. They saw the changed lives of these Gentile believers. They knew they did not need to have the law of Moses added to their way of life. Therefore, after hearing all of the evidence (see below: Acts 15:13-15) the Gentiles were not commanded by the Council to obey the law of Moses.

——————————————————

We should also look closely at the teaching in Acts 15:13-15— **“When they finished, James spoke up. ‘Brothers,’ he said, ‘listen to me. Simon has described to us how God first intervened to choose a people for his name from the Gentiles. The words of the prophets are in agreement with this, as it is written:’”**

At the Council, Peter and James (the brother of Jesus Christ, who according to tradition was stoned to death in 61 A.D.) were the two primary apostolic leaders or spokesmen for the apostles in the church. They wanted all the apostles, elders, and other believers to agree not only on the basis of what the Holy Spirit had done through Peter, Paul, and Barnabas, but also on the basis of what the Scriptures taught. God will not contradict himself, and the Holy Spirit will never contradict the Scriptures. Experiences can deceive people [and the Bible warns believers to be on their guard against deceiving spirits (see

1 Timothy 4:1)]. The work of the Holy Spirit in and the Holy Spirit's revelation to true Christian leaders and the Scriptures must be considered authorities that must be in agreement. The Holy Spirit will never contradict the word of God written, and the word of God written will always be consistent with a true revelation from the Holy Spirit. Therefore, James did not appeal to his authority as a leader in the church or as an apostle to settle the disputed issue. James turned everyone's attention to the Bible (the Old Testament Scriptures) that the Pharisees and Jews accepted, but did not fully understand (otherwise they would not have crucified Jesus the Messiah). James indicated that Simon Peter's experience was important and should be regarded as an authentic work of the Holy Spirit. James indicated that God intervened first through Peter (and they had recently heard how God had also intervened through Paul and Barnabas). This intervention by God through these men at different times and places indicated a pattern that God wanted the church to adopt in behalf of the Gentiles who believed in Jesus Christ for salvation. After appealing to the work of the Holy Spirit in the lives of respected church leaders, James appealed to the Old Testament prophets, the Scriptures. The Scriptures agreed with or were consistent with the experiences of Peter, Paul, and Barnabas. Since the Council's decisions would concern the ideas of Greek speaking Jews and Gentiles, James quoted from the Septuagint (LXX), the Greek translation of the Old Testament. The Council carefully considered the Scriptures, the work of the Holy Spirit in the lives of Peter, Paul, and Barnabas, the work of the Holy Spirit in the

Gentiles who believed, and the reasoning of the apostolic leaders of the church; then the Council decided they would not impose the law of Moses on Gentiles who believed in Jesus as Lord and Savior. After learning from the Holy Spirit and the Scriptures what the will of God was in the matter, the Council agreed unanimously and wrote a letter to the church in Antioch to resolve the dispute. For this reason, even today, Gentiles do not need to adopt Jewish practices in order to be saved.

Questions for Discussion and Thinking Further

1. What ideas did the opponents of Paul and Barnabas insist the Church adopt?

2. Why was it important for Peter, Paul, and Barnabas to tell "how" the Gentiles had been converted?

3. What two groups of leaders composed the Council in Jerusalem? How were these two groups selected? How might the experiences of these groups differ to benefit the Council's decisions?

4. Who made the choice that the Gentiles would hear the good news of Jesus and believe and be saved?

5. What evidences did Peter, Paul, Barnabas, and James give that led to a unanimous decision in favor of the good news of salvation by grace through faith in Jesus Christ?

Begin or close your class by reading the short weekly *International Bible Lesson*.

— © *Copyright 2015 by L.G. Parkhurst, Jr. Permission Granted for Not for Profit Use.*