

Acts 15 - John Karmelich

1. How do you tell a "Christian" from a "Non-Christian"?
 - a) It sounds like an opening line to a joke, but I'm actually quite serious.
 - b) Chapter 15 gives us some answers to that question, but more importantly, it gives us a model to follow when there are dividing issues to be discussed and resolved.
 - c) Chapter 15 is all about a major dispute concerning what it takes to be "saved", which is another way of saying whether you are, or are not, a Christian.
 - i) We are going to spend a lot of time talking about the specific issue of the chapter, which is whether or not one has to become a Jew prior to being a Christian. The argument is summarized in the buzzword "circumcision".
 - ii) A lot of you may not care about that issue. You know, from experience and 2,000 years of history one does not have to become a Jew to become a Christian.
 - iii) What I *first* want you to see in this chapter is the pattern used to solve the crisis at hand. The same method of resolution is a model for the church today.
 - iv) The modern application of Chapter 15 is "church dispute resolution".
 - a) Resolution on a major group level involves:
 - (1) Prayer,
 - (2) Discussion of the issue,
 - (3) Letting the leaders speak last after all the sides have been issued,
 - (4) Describe, if evident, how God is working in this situation,
 - (5) Using Scripture, and *the proper interpretation thereof*, as the authority for resolution.
 - v) On debatable issues, where either side of the issue can be strongly supported Biblically, I find its best to avoid those type of arguments, unless it's causing real division between two parties or a church in general. I have found it a waste of time to debate for debate's sake in these issues.
 - a) The focus of this chapter is over more *serious* issues, such as what is, vs. what is not a Christian.
2. With that introduction completed, we can now focus on the issue at hand, which is the relationship of Judaism and Christianity.
 - a) When we last left off in Chapter 14, Paul & Barnabas have planted many new Christian Churches consisting only of Gentiles, a.k.a., non-Jews.
 - b) Jewish Christians, based out of Jerusalem, were concerned that people were becoming Christians, and not becoming Jews first.
 - i) Their base of belief is that anybody could receive salvation, but it comes *through* Judaism. That includes the belief in Jesus as Messiah and Lord of your life.
 - c) Why would Jews be so concerned about people going directly to Jesus and bypassing Judaism? Why would they care?
 - i) First of all, it has been their belief system for thousands of years. It is difficult to change those types of beliefs overnight.
 - ii) Second, Jews use "The Law", which consists of all the laws of the Old Testament, not just the 10 commandments, and their interpretations thereof, as a *measurement for pleasing God*. It is inconceivable in their mind, that one could just "believe in Jesus, and live however they wanted to".

- a) Partially, they are correct. One cannot simply say, "I believe in Jesus", then live how they want. Demons believe in the existence of Jesus as God. Salvation requires believing in Jesus as *Lord* of your life, not just as your Savior. "Lord" requires obedience to whatever Jesus calls you to do. The answers to which is most of the New Testament.
 - (1) Therefore, these Jews main concern is about immorality running rampant under the pre-tense of "I believe in Jesus".
- iii) There is also an underlying problem that is not stated in the text, but is written "between the lines". That question is: "What will become of Judaism?"
- iv) For centuries, Jews have applied self-discipline to obey the Laws of the Old Testament, plus a lot of customs based on the interpretation of those laws. Does one throw away Judaism overnight simply because Jesus "fulfilled" the prophecies of the Old Testament?
- v) Also, what about the promises made to Jews for their obedience to God? God promised that the Messiah would rule "from the throne of David" (1 Kings 2:45, et.al.)
 - a) "The throne of David" is not the throne in Heaven. This is a literal thrown on earth, over the earth, based out of Jerusalem. Jesus will one-day rule over the earth *from* the earth!
 - b) Conservative Jews believe in a 1,000-year millennium where the Messiah will rule the earth from Jerusalem.
 - c) Most Protestant Christians have a similar view. Jesus will rule on earth, from Jerusalem during the millennium. This is described in Revelation, Chapter 20.
 - (1) God told David: "When your days are fulfilled and you rest with your fathers, I will set up your seed after you, who will come from your body, and I will establish his kingdom. He shall build a house for My name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever." (2 Sam 7:12-13 NKJV)
 - d) Last point on this, and we'll move on. In the first Chapter of Luke, an angel informs Mary of her pregnancy and makes this promise:
 - (1) He (Jesus) will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, (Luke 1:32 NIV)
 - (2) "The throne of David" is not the throne in heaven, where Jesus sits now. It is a literal throne on earth. It is where David ruled over Israel. That throne did not exist during Jesus' lifetime as they were under Roman rule.
 - (3) So now that Israel is a self-governing country again, does that mean Jesus is coming back soon? The answer is: hopefully! No one knows the day or hour, but there are certainly a lot of signs that things are moving quickly toward that event.

3. Which leads us back to the original problem to a Jew who believes in Judaism. It's not just about giving up their rituals. The question is also: "What about all the promises made to the nation of Israel?" God promised the Messiah would rule from Israel. Is that promise "dead"?
- a) First of all, this is a *majority* view among Catholics, Orthodox and some Protestant denominations, but not all. This view is that the church "replaces" Israel. The view is that Israel "forfeited" their promises when they rejected their Messiah. This is referred to as "replacement theology". Historically, a lot of anti-Semitism came from this view.

- b) Conservative Protestant denominations and most Pentecostal churches disagree with replacement theology. I also take this view.
 - i) The reason I disagree so strongly is I refuse to believe God is even capable of going back on his promises. His promises to Israel were unconditional. Therefore, they could not be forfeited. If we can't trust God with the unconditional promises he made to Israel, how can we trust his promises he made to us?
 - c) The key to understanding this is Romans Chapter 11. We live in the "time of the Gentiles" (Romans 11:25). God is keeping count of how many Gentiles get saved. Only God himself knows this number. Once it is complete, God turns his focus back on the nation of Israel. That is what most of the Book of Revelation is all about.
4. Before we start on Chapter 15, a good cross-reference to read is Galatians, Chapter 2. In that chapter, Paul talks about the events of this chapter in Acts.
- a) There are a few details written in Acts not disclosed in Galatians, and vice-versa. It does not mean either account is wrong, just simply different details are revealed.
 - i) I'll try to reveal some of those as we go.
5. We are now on page 3, and I haven't touched one verse yet, which means I'm in big trouble. Let's get going! ☺
6. Chapter 15, Verse 1: Some men came down from Judea to Antioch and were teaching the brothers: "Unless you are circumcised, according to the custom taught by Moses, you cannot be saved."
- a) Remember where we left off back in Chapter 14. Paul & Barnabas finished their missionary journey, and now they were back at their base camp, which was Antioch. Here they worked with the Gentile-church based there.
 - b) Now here come these men from Judea. Luke (the author) quotes them in Verse 1.
 - c) Remember in my introduction I talked about "What is and is not a Christian. We'll here we go right here.
 - i) The church of Antioch was a young church, with not much experience and knowledge about Jesus or the Old Testament.
 - ii) Here comes some people from Judea. The locals must have thought, "We'll, these guys are from/near Jerusalem. They must know the Scriptures very well. If they say we are 'not saved', maybe there is some validity to that".
 - iii) This scenario has played out a lot through Christian history. Some "experts" will come to naïve believers and say, "we'll, if you *really* want to be saved, you have to do this, this and that."
 - iv) A typical modern example is how many Christians handle baptism. They will ask *how* you were baptized? We're you sprinkled or dunked? How many times? You *know* you're not saved unless you're baptized just the right way?
 - a) These are examples of "adding works" to your salvation. Such issues are Biblically wrong. Period!
 - b) "Salvation" is best summarized by Paul in Romans:
 - (1) That if you confess with your mouth, "Jesus is Lord," and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. (Romans 10:9 NIV)
 - (a) In my bible, I underline the "period" at the end of that sentence. There is nothing to add to that.

- (2) To me, there is the "salvation" issue and the rest is just debate. Christians can debate all day over baptism, or end-times issues, but they are just that, debate. Salvation is *believing* Jesus is Lord (not just Savior!) of your life and putting your *trust* in that fact.
 - (3) "Adding" to salvation is making issues like "how" you are baptized, or what is "proper" to wear to church on Sundays, or a thousand other things. Every now and then it is good to examine your life and ask yourself "am I adding anything to what God did?" Am I trusting in anything that I do (e.g. church attendance, my own behavior) as a standard for how good I am?
7. Verse 2: Paul's response: This brought Paul and Barnabas into sharp dispute and debate with them. So Paul and Barnabas were appointed, along with some other believers, to go up to Jerusalem to see the apostles and elders about this question.
- a) To me, one of the most important responsibilities of any pastor is "protecting his flock". It is essential of a pastor of a church to watch out for false teachers, and false doctrines. With that let's hear it for Paul & Barnabas for standing up to these guys!
 - b) Notice the dispute-resolution being handled in this verse alone. I envision a big yelling-match taking place between the "circumcisers" and Paul & Barnabas. It sounded like the issue was not going to get resolved then and there. Therefore both sides agreed to take the issue to the "head church" for resolution.
 - i) For those of you familiar with the expression "nip it in the bud", it applies here! Paul & Barnabas knew that this issue would continue unless it was resolved by the church leaders.
 - c) The interesting thing is, if you study the life of Paul, he was probably convinced he was right on this issue (which he was), and it didn't matter to *him* what the elders in Jerusalem said. Paul studied the scriptures, had direct revelations from God, understood what "grace" is all probably better than most Christians of that day. Even if the Jerusalem leaders ruled against Paul, he would have still taught his views.
 - i) Notice Paul's attitude toward the leaders in Jerusalem, quoting Paul: "As for those who seemed to be important--whatever they were makes no difference to me; God does not judge by external appearance--those men added nothing to my message." (Gal 2:6 NIV)
8. Verse 3: The church sent them on their way, and as they traveled through Phoenicia and Samaria, they told how the Gentiles had been converted. This news made all the brothers very glad. ⁴ When they came to Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the church and the apostles and elders, to whom they reported everything God had done through them.
- a) To recap: "The church" in Verse 3 is the church in Antioch who sent Paul, Barnabas and probably a few others to Jerusalem. On their way to Jerusalem, they passed through Phoenicia and Samaria.
 - i) "The Phoenician and Samaritan Christians, being themselves converts of the Hellenists' (Greek) mission after Stephen's martyrdom (Acts 8:4-25; 11:19), probably took a broader view than that which prevailed at Jerusalem and rejoiced at the news (of Gentile conversion)." Expositor's Bible Encyclopedia
 - b) Notice there is 3 groups in Verse 4: "The church, the apostles and the elders".
 - i) Remember in the last chapter Paul appointed elders in every church he planted. They ran the administrative side of the church. The word "apostle" means "sent ones". "The" apostles are generally defined as those were direct witnesses of Jesus' resurrection. They included more than just the original 11 (remember Judas died prior to the event).

- c) Galatians Chapter 2 mentions that Paul took Titus along too. Galatians also mentions there was a private meeting with the church leaders, Peter, John and James, prior to the big meeting to discuss the issue.
 - d) Notice the modesty of Paul and Barnabas. It is not what *they* did, but what God did through them. That is a good attitude to remember!
9. Verse 5: Then some of the believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees stood up and said, "The Gentiles must be circumcised and required to obey the law of Moses."
- a) If you remember the Pharisees from the Gospel's, Jesus had little or nothing good to say about them. This is a sect of the Jews who were very strict in keeping the law. Remember that Paul himself was a Pharisee prior to his conversion (Philippians 3:5).
 - i) The good news is that we read here of some Pharisees becoming Christians. Although they were wrong about the circumcision issue (to this point), they did accept Jesus.
 - ii) Given that Pharisees are *engrained* in "The Law" and their beliefs, I speculate that it probably took the visible appearance of the resurrected Jesus to change their views. This is another bit of evidence to the physical resurrection of Jesus.
 - iii) Since the Pharisees who strictly observed the law, I can understand why it was so hard for them to change. Old habits die hard. Also, the issues I brought up in the first 2 pages were a concern. For example, what about the promises to the Nation of Israel?
10. Verse 6, the big meeting begins: The apostles and elders met to consider this question.
- a) Anybody who's ever been through a heated-debate meeting knows that there is a lot of passion in the room, and it is very intense. Often, both sides need to vent out their frustrations and know that the other side hears them before everybody can calm down and the issue can be resolved.
 - i) Ray Steadman has a great quote about this type of situation: "Some people have something to say, and some people just need to say something."
11. Verse 7: After much discussion, Peter got up and addressed them:
- a) Give Peter credit. The old impulsive Peter would have spoken early and taken matters in his own hands. *This* Peter waited until most people had a chance to speak.
 - i) Peter *may* have spoken earlier in the debate. Here we have Peter as a leader making a good closing argument.
12. Verse 7 continued, Peter's speech: "Brothers, you know that some time ago God made a choice among you that the Gentiles might hear from my lips the message of the gospel and believe. ⁸ God, who knows the heart, showed that he accepted them by giving the Holy Spirit to them, just as he did to us.
- a) For those who remember Acts Chapter 10, that is what Peter is referring to here. That was the chapter of "the great sheet coming down from heaven" and the Roman Centurion Cornelius visiting Peter. Peter gave a sermon to Cornelius's family and friends, and they all believed. Finally, the gift of "tongues" came down on all of them. This is also done for Peter's sake, so he could show that the Gentiles have received the Holy Spirit just as Jews were. That is what is being described in these two verses.
 - i) The "them" refers to the Gentiles. The "us" refers to Christian Jews.
13. Peter continues, verse 9: He made no distinction between us and them, for he purified their hearts by faith. ¹⁰ Now then, why do you try to test God by putting on the necks of the disciples a yoke that neither we nor our fathers have been able to bear?
- a) One of the great questions is "Why did God bother with the Old Testament?" I mean, God could have sent Jesus to die on the cross after Adam & Eve ate the fruit, and saved a whole lot of trouble! ☺ Also, what does this question have to do with Peter's speech?

- i) Everything! First of all, it was necessary to show the world in a dramatic way, the God is the *only* God that exists. Thus, he picked the Israelites, parted the Red Sea, etc. God didn't choose the Israelites because they were better than other people, it was because he needed to demonstrate to the world that God is the only true God, and he needed a people to be a witness to that fact.
- ii) Second, God needed to tell what His standards for perfection are. That is where the law comes in. This is why God gave us the 10 commandments only after He demonstrated to the world that He, and He alone is God.
- iii) Third, this is where the Old Testament comes in and the main point of Peter's argument: Israel failed to keep the law. Soon after the 10 commandments, "the Golden Calf" was built as an idol. The Israelites sinned so badly that God finally took them out of the land *completely* and exiled them to Babylon. The Old Testament ends (historically) with the rebuilding of the Temple, and the Israelites committing idolatry after they have returned from Babylon (as described in the Book of Nehemiah).
 - a) The whole narrative of the Old Testament shows that it is a history of failure on the part of the Jews to keep God's laws. One of the main points of the Old Testament is man's failure to keep God's laws. If you read the laws, they all sound "reasonable" and "do-able". The Israelites agreed to keep them in exchange for preservation. (Going back to what I said about "replacement theology" God made both conditional and unconditional promises to the Nation of Israel.).
 - b) The Old Testament shows the failure of self-discipline to be righteous before God.
- iv) That is what Peter meant in Verse 11 when he said "why do you try to test God by putting on the necks of the disciples a yoke that neither we nor our fathers have been able to bear?"

14. Verse 11, Peter continues: No! We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved, just as they are."

- a) Notice the "backwards" argument of Peter:
 - i) He doesn't say "they" (Gentiles) are saved the same way as us (Jews)
 - ii) He says "we" (Jews) are saved the same way as them (Gentiles)
 - iii) How is that? By the Grace of God! One of the purposes of history is to show how much we need a Savior to pay the price for our sins! History shows the lack of man's ability to live a righteous life outside of the faith that God, and God alone pays the price for your sins.
 - a) There is an old joke that says, "There are 2 ways to get to heaven. Never mess up even once in your life, and tell Jesus to "move over!" ☺, or 2) Tell God I want admittance to heaven based on what Jesus did for me! You cannot add *anything* to "#2".
 - b) Even if you thought you *could* live the perfect life as described in the laws of Moses, read Jesus *interpretation* of the Law in Matthew, Chapters 5-7. Jesus himself shows a strict interpretation of the law that is impossible for any man to live up to! That's the point!

15. Verse 12, now different speakers take over: The whole assembly became silent as they listened to Barnabas and Paul telling about the miraculous signs and wonders God had done among the Gentiles through them.
- a) If Peter's speech was not validation enough, the undeniable miracles that God has performed through Barnabas and Paul also validated how God was working through the Gentiles. Remember in Jewish thinking "two witnesses in agreement are needed to make something true" (Deuteronomy 19:15).
16. Now it is James' turn to speak, verse 13: When they finished, James spoke up: "Brothers, listen to me. ¹⁴ Simon (Peter) has described to us how God at first showed his concern by taking from the Gentiles a people for himself. ¹⁵ The words of the prophets are in agreement with this, as it is written: ¹⁶ `After this I will return and rebuild David's fallen tent. Its ruins I will rebuild, and I will restore it, ¹⁷ that the remnant of men may seek the Lord, and all the Gentiles who bear my name, says the Lord, who does these things' ¹⁸ that have been known for ages.
- a) This is James, the half-brother of Jesus. This is the author of the Book of James. James became one of the leaders of the Jerusalem church.
- i) This is not the apostle James, the brother of John.
- b) Back on the first page, I stated that Chapter 15 is a model for disputes over church doctrines. I argued that the final argument is Scripture itself and the proper interpretation thereof.
- i) Everybody has already had their chance to speak.
- ii) Peter ended the debate by pointing out the failure of Israel to live the law.
- iii) Paul & Barnabas then described how God was working in an obvious way.
- iv) Last and most importantly is Scripture itself. If Paul & Barnabas were performing miracles, but their sermons denied the basic foundations of the Bible, then those miracles should be ignored. Period! Scripture is clear on this.
- c) The Scripture being quoted is from Amos Chapters 9, Verses 11-12.
- i) What was the point of quoting the Scripture? To me, this Scripture verse is the key point of the whole chapter. Commentators generally take two views on interpretation, both of which are Biblically sound.
- ii) The 1st view is that this quote from Amos focuses on Jesus' *first* coming.
- a) Amos predicted there would be a day where both Jews and Gentiles would seek the Lord "together".
- b) The key line is in Verse 17 that says "that the remnant of men may seek the Lord, and all the Gentiles who bear my name,"
- (1) "The remnant of men" refers to Jews.
- c) Ray Steadman, among others takes the view that these 2 verses have nothing to do with Jesus' Second Coming. Ray believes strongly in the rapture and Jesus Second Coming. He just doesn't believe these issues are being discussed in these 2 verses.
- d) One of the rules of Bible interpretation is "a text taken out of *context* becomes a *pre-text*. The point is that the main discussion of the moment is whether Gentiles can be saved without becoming Jews first. James is using this verse from the Old Testament Book of Amos as his support.
- iii) The 2nd view is that this quote from Amos includes Jesus' *Second Coming*.
- a) Remember the underlying question that the Jews were wondering about: "What will become of Judaism? What about all the unconditional promises made to Israel in the Old Testament?"
- b) The key words are in Verse 16: "After this I will return and rebuild David's fallen tent. Its ruins I will rebuild, and I will restore it". I underlined "After this". After what?

- c) The view is *after* the "Age of the Gentiles". This is the view that right now, there is no distinction between Jews and Gentiles. That is what Romans Chapter 10 is all about. But there will be a day, post rapture, post 7-year tribulation period, where Jesus will *literally* reign and rule from Jerusalem, and all the promises made in the Old Testament to Israel will be fulfilled. That is what Romans Chapter 11 is all about.
 - d) These 2 views are not contradictory, it is simply that each view *focuses* on a different aspect of God's overall "game plan".
 - e) Not all commentators take both views. My recommendation to you, the reader, is to re-read the verses and come to your own conclusion.
 - (1) Surely the Sovereign LORD does nothing without revealing his plan to his servants the prophets. (Amos 3:7 NIV)
17. James wraps up his arguments: Verse 19: "It is my judgment, therefore, that we should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God.²⁰ Instead we should write to them, telling them to abstain from food polluted by idols, from sexual immorality, from the meat of strangled animals and from blood.
- a) The Expositor's Bible Encyclopedia has a good paraphrase of James' argument: "We cannot be in opposition to the express will of God, as evidenced by Peter's testimony and the prophets' words--but only God himself knows for certain how everything fits together and is to be fully understood!"
 - b) James "final word" is that it is OK for Gentiles to become Christians without becoming Jews first. James only asks 4 things: I'll discuss all 4 below. Notice what is not on the list: Circumcision! the 10 commandments, baptism, etc.
 - i) When I was a young Christian, I once thought that these 4 things were a list of requirements for a Christian. I now take a different view.
 - a) Remember that the focus of the meeting is about Christians and Jews getting along with each other.
 - b) What these requirements are things that are offensive to Jews.
 - c) These 4 things are not an obligation list, but a request out of love!
 - (1) Let's suppose you were having dinner guests who were strict vegetarians. Would you tell them "Sorry, but we're having steak. Dig in!" Of course not! Within reason, most of us go out of our way to please our friends, even when their ways are different than ours. That is what we have here. It is not about theology, it is about not being offensive to fellow Christians.
 - c) Let me talk a little about the 4 things that James asks Gentiles to abstain from:
 - i) Item #1: don't eat food that has been dedicated to idols
 - a) In this society, the best meats were often dedicated to Greek Gods. Jews considered it idolatry to buy food dedicated to such idols.
 - b) Paul himself did not think it was wrong to eat this meat. His view is that "you know these idols are meaningless, so who cares what you eat? But he did say it was wrong to eat those if others *thought* it was wrong, as not to offend them.

- c) "And it is a sin against Christ to sin against your brother by encouraging him to do something he thinks is wrong. So if eating meat offered to idols is going to make my brother sin, I'll not eat any of it as long as I live because I don't want to do this to him."
(1 Corinthians 8:13 The Living Bible)
 - (1) A modern application is the way you dress for church or your attitude toward dancing. If a Christian is convinced you it is a "sin" to do things a certain way, It is a sin to do these things in front of him or her, as to not cause that person "to stumble".
- ii) Item#2: Prohibition against sexual immorality
 - a) The Bible is *very* clear in that sex *outside* of marriage is wrong. In the Greek culture, multiple wives & affairs were common. This is a situation where God called his people to separate themselves from the world.
 - b) The Old and New Testament are very clear on this.
 - c) God didn't do this to prevent us from pleasure. He designed it this way for our own benefit and happiness. The growing intimacy of a long term, loving personal relationship *under God*, is a model for the type of love God desires between himself and Christians.
- iii) Item #3: Prohibition against eating meat of strangled animals
 - a) In the Old Testament, any animal that died of natural causes was not to be eaten. It is essentially forbiddance against "road-kill".
 - b) The issue here is similar to #1 (eating things dedicated to idols)
 - (1) There is no prohibition against Christians eating animals that were strangled, but it is a matter of not offending Jews.
- iv) Item #4: Prohibition from blood
 - a) This is about drinking blood.
 - (1) Yes, you can be a Christian and eat your steaks rare! ☺
 - b) Drinking of blood was considered a ritual of the occult as it is today.
 - c) Here is an instance where Christians and Jehovah Witnesses disagree.
 - (1) They interpret this verse as God forbidding blood transfusions, as they see this as "drinking blood".
 - (2) To put it simply it is wrong. The Bible never forbids seeking the best medicine and medical treatments available for the preservation of human life. Personally, I'd rather have the best non-Christian doctor I can get as a surgeon than a Christian brother who has no experience!

18. James final sentence, Verse 21: For Moses has been preached in every city from the earliest times and is read in the synagogues on every Sabbath."
- a) You need to spend time with religious Jews to understand the awe and respect that Jews have for Moses. Remember that James is speaking to a Jewish audience. Despite the difference in views about Gentiles and the Law, all the Jews honored Moses, the same way Christians honor the Apostles and Paul as great men used by God. By mentioning Moses by name, James is stating the importance of the law, the Jewish Culture, the historical significance of the Israelites all in one sentence.
 - b) He is acknowledging that Judaism has its place in bringing God's Messiah and his message to the people. He already stated that Gentiles can come directly to God without Judaism. Now he gave some things he asks Gentiles to do as to not upset Jews and they could get along at worship services.

19. Verse 22: Then the apostles and elders, with the whole church, decided to choose some of their own men and send them to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas. They chose Judas (called Barsabbas) and Silas, two men who were leaders among the brothers.
- a) So Paul and Barnabas, along with Judas (no relation to *the* Judas) and Silas were sent to go back to Antioch. If Paul & Barnabas went back by themselves, the Antioch Christians may not believe them. That is why other witnesses were necessary.
20. Verse 23 With them they sent the following letter: The apostles and elders, your brothers, To the Gentile believers in Antioch, Syria and Cilicia: Greetings. ²⁴ We have heard that some went out from us without our authorization and disturbed you, troubling your minds by what they said. ²⁵ So we all agreed to choose some men and send them to you with our dear friends Barnabas and Paul-- ²⁶ men who have risked their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. ²⁷ Therefore we are sending Judas and Silas to confirm by word of mouth what we are writing. ²⁸ It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us not to burden you with anything beyond the following requirements: ²⁹ You are to abstain from food sacrificed to idols, from blood, from the meat of strangled animals and from sexual immorality. You will do well to avoid these things. Farewell.
- a) This is a lot of verses, but the letter basically repeats what has already been decided at the Jewish council.
- b) Notice the admission that Gentiles are on an equal footing with Jews in Verse 23: "The apostles and elders, your brothers,"
- i) The leaders, the apostles, and the Jewish Christians saw themselves as equals or "brothers" with the Gentile church. That was a big step for a lot of them.
- c) Notice in Verse 24 the church admitted that the "circumciser's" approached them without their permission. It is important to state that fact in case they come again!
- d) Judas & Silas are mentioned by name. It adds validity to the letter. Opponents can't argue the letter was forged or stolen.
21. Verse 30: The men were sent off and went down to Antioch, where they gathered the church together and delivered the letter. ³¹ The people read it and were glad for its encouraging message.
- a) I don't know about you, but speaking as an adult male, if somebody told me I had to be circumcised to become a Christian, and then I got a letter saying that circumcision is not necessarily, I'd be rejoicing too! ☺
- i) On a related topic, I do believe in circumcision for babies under 8 days old for health reasons. I've read in medical journals babies don't feel any significant pain. I've yet to see a baby die, or suffer traumatic harm from circumcision. The New Testament is *very* clear that circumcise is not necessary to be a Christian.
(cross-references: Galatians 6:15, Colossians 3:11)
- b) There is a strong need in people for acceptance. The fact that the "head church" recognized the Antioch church as "equals" and "brothers" is an important part of ministry
22. Verse 32: Judas and Silas, who themselves were prophets, said much to encourage and strengthen the brothers.
- a) There is an old joke here about "give a minister an audience and he'll preach away!"
- b) With that aside, remember that prophecy is not just walking up to people and predicting their future. "Prophets" in this sense, are those who know how to properly interpret the Word of God, and give encouraging messages about God's promises.
- i) "For the testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy." (Revelation 19:10b, NIV)

23. Verse 33: After spending some time there, they were sent off by the brothers with the blessing of peace to return to those who had sent them.³⁵ But Paul and Barnabas remained in Antioch, where they and many others taught and preached the word of the Lord.
- a) Judas and Silas went back to Jerusalem. Silas must have returned to Antioch as he accompanied Paul on his second missionary journey that starts in the next chapter.
 - b) A good application to this verse is: Once the issue is resolved, get back to what God called you to do. Notice after the resolution of the issue, Paul and Barnabas got back to their ministry of "taught and preached the word of the Lord".
24. Verse 36: Some time later Paul said to Barnabas, "Let us go back and visit the brothers in all the towns where we preached the word of the Lord and see how they are doing."
- a) Paul had the "itch" to get back on the road and visit the churches he set up. That is a way to tell if God calls you to be a missionary. No special prayers or signs, but you just "know" you got to go. That is also a way of discovering your spiritual gifts. It is usually something you just have a strong desire to do and have a talent for doing.
25. Verse 37: Barnabas wanted to take John, also called Mark, with them,³⁸ but Paul did not think it wise to take him, because he had deserted them in Pamphylia and had not continued with them in the work.³⁹ They had such a sharp disagreement that they parted company. Barnabas took Mark and sailed for Cyprus,⁴⁰ but Paul chose Silas and left, commended by the brothers to the grace of the Lord.⁴¹ He went through Syria and Cilicia, strengthening the churches.
- a) Paul & Barnabas are not going to make another missionary trip together. They got into an argument because Barnabas wanted to take his cousin John-Mark along. John-Mark is the author of the Gospel of Mark. Because he dissented Paul & Barnabas on their last trip, Paul felt that the guy was not trustworthy, and thus was against the idea.
 - b) Who was right and who was wrong is a classical Christian debate. I'm not sure there is a right answer. The commentaries are real split over this. The other positive news is that God used this event to "double his missionaries". The word for "disagreement" in the original Greek is very neutral. The split caused two separate teams of missionaries: 1) Barnabas and Mark, 2) Paul & Silas.
 - c) A consensus view among the commentators is that the argument was not a good thing, but God still used the results for His glory. That is common in the Bible. There are many stories where people "messed up", but God still used that mess for His glory. Those people are still held accountable for their actions, but it is a case where God knows all things, and since he knows the results in advance, God can use those results.
 - i) The first example is Adam and Eve. When they sinned, they were still responsible for their actions and paid the consequences. But God knew in advance this was going to happen and thus began the path that lead to Jesus dying for the sins of mankind.
 - d) Paul did make up with Mark. In Paul's last letter, written shortly before his death, he calls for Mark to join him in Rome (2 Timothy 4:11).
26. OK, that's enough for one week! ☺
27. Let's pray: Father for we thank you for these lessons and patterns you show us in the Book of Acts. Help us not to focus on issues that divide us, but on the cross that unites us. Given us wisdom and discernment in our decisions as Christians, both individually and corporately. Help us to discern proper doctrine for us as Christians, and to examine our lives, so we may live more pleasing to you. For we ask this in Jesus name, Amen.