



"REASONS TO REJOICE"

"Your Words were found and I ate them, and Your Word was to me the joy and rejoicing of my heart." Jeremiah 15:16

"RIDING THROUGH"

THE BOOK OF ACTS- LESSON 15

In chapter 15, we find ourselves back in Antioch with Paul and Barnabas. News of the Gentile conversion was certainly a hot issue at the time. In the months that followed the return of Paul and Barnabas to Antioch, a debate arose over what laws the Gentiles needed to follow in order to be saved. This issue was very important to Paul, as it challenged God's very action of accepting the Gentiles based on their faith alone (Acts 10). The future of the church depended on the decisions made by the apostles on this debate.

First Day

1. Read Acts 15:1-41. Write any key words or phrases that you find. What would you title this chapter?

2. List any main characters. Did you meet anyone new?

3. Read the following sections. Write a one-sentence summary statement for each. Title each section. (This helps you recall what was in the chapter.)
 - a. **Section I:** Verses 1-5

 - b. **Section II:** Verses 6-12

 - c. **Section III:** Verses 13-21

 - d. **Section IV:** Verses 22-35

 - e. **Section V:** Verses 36-41

4. Reread Acts 15:1-5 (Section I). What caused the debate to begin?
5. Were the men in verse 2 authorized by the apostles to be teaching this doctrine? (Read Acts 15:24)
6. Why did these men want the Gentiles to be circumcised?

These men from Judea were called Judaizers. They believed that to be a Christian, one had to convert to the practices of Judaism, such as circumcision. They were deeply rooted in their Jewish traditions and history and believed that the Gentiles must also observe the law. Basically, this meant that a Gentile must become a Jew in order to be saved.

Lloyd John Ogilvie, in his book Drumbeat of Love, helps us to understand their struggle:

"For the Pharisee, a completed Jew, the Lord was the incarnate culmination of everything he had studied and learned. No need to do away with his heritage; now he was a fulfilled Hebrew among the expectant Hebrews..."

"But if Jesus was the Messiah of the Jews, what did he think about non-Hebrews who also became convinced of His Lordship? Now the Christian Pharisee had a problem. Conditioning and cultural pride flowed in his bloodstream. His people had paid a high price to maintain their uniqueness. He was not willing to give away the centuries of particulars that had made Israel a great people for the Lord, to people who did not conform. If Jesus was the Hebrew Messiah, anyone wanting his salvation would have to become a Jew first! How else could he know the full meaning and purpose of God? The Law of Moses must be maintained as the preliminary preparation to the new life in Christ.

These converted Pharisees and their followers were not bad people; their problem was that they stood with one foot in Moses' Law and one foot in Christ's love. Now the ground was separating beneath them. They would have to leap one way or the other, but not without a frantic effort to hold back the earthquake and the resulting theological fault. Having tried to maintain "both-and," they were ending up with an "either-or" which contradicted the Messiah Himself and His unqualified love for all."

These Judaizers were trying to rebuild the wall that had been pulled down between the Jew and the *Gentile* by forcing them to accept the *Mosaic Law* and practices. They were placing a hardship on them that God Himself didn't require (Acts 15:10).

Sometime after this, the Christians in the city of *Galatia* were experiencing the same problem. This resulted in Paul writing the letter to the *Galatians*, explaining the relationship between the law and grace. He reminded them that Christ came to set the believers free from the bondage of the law. Believers are justified by faith, not by the law.

7. It is essential that we have a good understanding of the relationship between law and grace. Read the **Book of Galatians**. (Yes, it's a lot of reading, but vital to understanding our chapter). When you are through, answer the following questions, giving verses to support your answer:

- a. What is the purpose of the law?
- b. How are we saved?
- c. How are we freed from the yoke of bondage?
- d. How far can we take our liberties?
- e. Briefly describe the relationship between the law and grace.

8. According to *Galatians 6:15*, did Paul believe you needed to be circumcised?

9. In *Acts 15:2*, where did Paul and Barnabas go to find the answer to this question?

** Notice the contrast of how the news of the *Gentile* conversion was received in the cities of *Samaria* and *Phoenicia*, and the different groups in *Jerusalem*.**

10. Why do you think those in *Samaria* and *Phoenicia* were excited over the news?

This ends our lesson for today. I pray that you all have a better understanding of the relationship between the law and grace. We need to be assured that salvation comes by faith in Christ, **PLUS** nothing! Never let anyone fool you into thinking that you need to join their group or follow their rules to be saved! Through God's Word, "He has given us all things that pertain to life and godliness" (2 Peter 1:3). We don't need man's list of "things to do"! **Let's rejoice together that we're free in Christ!!!**

Memory Verse of the Week: "Now therefore, why do you test God by putting a yoke on the neck of the disciples which neither our fathers nor we were able to bear?" Acts 15:10

Second Day

Review your memory verse. Are you testing God?

The apostles came together to settle the matter brought to them by Paul and Barnabas (Acts 15:6). This meeting is known as the Jerusalem council. This council handled the situation decently and orderly, with the intent of keeping unity within the church. Richard Baxter, when speaking about unity and cooperation between Christians, once said, "**In necessary things, unity; in doubtful things, liberty; in all things, charity.**"

1. Read Acts 15:6-12.
2. Sum up Peter's response to this matter.
3. Do you remember when Peter witnessed the Holy Spirit coming upon the Gentiles? How did they receive the Spirit? Was it by works of the law? (Give the chapter and verses for your answer.)

The apostles allowed both sides to present their arguments (Acts 15:7a). Peter then points out that the main problem with the Pharisees' argument was that the keeping of the law was humanly impossible (Acts 15:10).

4. Read the words of Jesus in Matthew 23:1-4. Describe what the Pharisees were doing.

The Pharisees had made the law a heavy yoke, or a burden, to the Jews. F.F. Bruce says that prior to AD 70, the severe school of Shammai was dominant in interpreting the law for the Jews, and the viewing of the traditional law as a great burden was characteristic of the ordinary Jew at the time.

5. How did the psalmist see the law, according to Psalm 1:2? Why this difference?
6. Do you see God's Word as a yoke of burden or a delight? Do you view His Word as a list of have-to's, rather than delights? Are His commandments supposed to be burdensome? Read Matthew 11:28-30. What changes do you need to make in your heart?
7. What was the crowd's response to Peter's answer? (vs 12)
8. What did Paul and Barnabas get to share? (vs 12)
9. If the apostles made the wrong decision, what could have happened? How could the church today be affected?
10. Has anyone ever tried to impose their "yoke" on you? What was it? What did you do?
11. Have you ever tried to put your convictions on others, making Christianity a heavy yoke for them to bear? How is this especially dangerous for a new believer?

12. Listed below are some "things to do." Read each one and decide if they should be obeyed because they are a specific command from God or if they are areas in which you have to make some personal decisions. Remember, you may have strong convictions on an issue, but decide if it's your own personal conviction, or a direct command from God. One's convictions must always be based on Scriptural principles, but sometimes issues are considered grey areas and need to be decided on as individuals (but always based on God's Word). It is good to have convictions. Romans 14:23 tells us that whatever you can't do by faith is sin to you.
- a. Praying
 - b. Loving others
 - c. Wearing your hair a certain length
 - d. Going to church
 - e. Wearing only dresses to church
 - f. Social drinking
 - g. Playing sports on Sundays
 - h. Watching TV
 - i. Going to movies
 - j. Baptism
 - k. Putting God first in your life
 - l. Dying to self
 - m. Dressing modestly

This ends our lesson for today. I'm rejoicing that the apostles listened to the Holy Spirit as they made their decisions. I'm glad that God's yoke is light and that we can delight in His law! Aren't you?

Third Day

What's your memory verse?

After Peter presented his case, Paul and Barnabas shared all the miracles that God had done among the Gentiles. Next we meet James, who stands and offers his recommendations regarding the issue at hand.

1. Read Acts 15:13-29.
2. Who is James? Read Galatians 1:19 and Matthew 13:55. When did James believe in Jesus? Read John 7:5 and 1 Corinthians 15:7.

James is usually thought of as the head of the church in Jerusalem (Acts 12:17). James refers to Peter by his Hebrew name, Simon, in verse 14. Let's look closely at the words offered by James.

3. Who does James say is responsible for the conversion of the Gentiles?
(Acts 15:14)

The word "people" in verse 14 is usually used when speaking about Israel as the people of God. Here James includes the Gentiles as well as the Jews among God's people, the church.

4. Why do you think James uses the words of the prophets in his argument?
(Acts 15:15)

James quotes from Amos 9:8-15. In verse 16, the phrase "after this" refers to the age of the church. Jesus will return after the appointed time and will rebuild the temple. The Jews will be restored and God will bless them abundantly. By quoting Amos, James is reminding his audience that Jesus Christ was the fulfillment of the prophecies in the Old Testament. It also showed how important God's Word was to James.

In verse 18, he claims that the salvation of the Gentiles was all a part of God's plan. James uses this verse to remind us that God is omniscient, which means He knows everything, including all that's happening in your life!

5. Read the following verses that speak about God's omniscience. What do they say about the knowledge of God? How does each minister to you?
- a. Isaiah 40:12-14
 - b. Isaiah 55:8-9
 - c. Romans 11:33-36
 - d. Colossians 2:2-3
6. God knows everything that's happening in your life. How does that bring you comfort? Hope? (Or does it?) How should believing this affect how you live?

7. What was James' recommendation in verse 19-20?

James desired unity between the *Gentile* believers and the Jewish believers. Feasting and eating together was a big part of their culture, and James wanted to avoid any problems in the future. He knew that because of the strict moral and dietary code of the Jewish law, Jews would be easily offended when eating with the *Gentiles*, who had much different eating habits. James suggested that because the *Gentiles* were not being required to be circumcised and follow other Jewish traditions, the *Gentiles* should willingly abstain from certain practices that would be particularly offensive to the Jews. James proposed a compromise. This compromise was not a doctrinal one, but more of a give-and-take situation on issues that were not essential to their salvation. He wanted each to respect the other's convictions.

8. What things did James ask the *Gentiles* to abstain from? (Vs 20)

Food offered to idols was common in the pagan *Gentile* world. Most of the meat for sale was taken from animals that had been used for some sacrificial purpose in a pagan temple. They usually dedicated or offered the food to a particular god. To a Jew, this was blasphemy against the God of Israel, and he could not eat it.

Strangled foods and bloody foods were also a no-no for the Jew. The Jews could not eat anything that had blood remaining in the body (*Genesis 9:4, Leviticus 17:11-14, Deuteronomy 12:16, 23-25*). If an animal was strangled, there would still be blood remaining in him. They had to eat a clean animal that had its blood drained and was handled properly. This made it "kosher," therefore, edible.

Fornication is another thing that was totally against the Jewish law. James could have been referring to the sexual immorality that was running rampant in the *Gentile* world, even under the guise of religion. Sex with the temple prostitutes was common. This was a practice that was hard for the *Gentiles* to break. James could also have been telling them to hold to the Old Testament marriage laws found in *Leviticus 18*. James was certainly not "suggesting" that they not practice fornication, but reminding them that it was a commandment from God Himself.

Paul writes more about our liberties as Christians and reveals to us the spirit behind what was being said. (*1 Corinthians 8 and Romans 14:1-15:6*) The whole goal is

to not use our liberties and freedoms if they will offend or stumble someone else. Paul tells us that one goal of our Christian walk is to think of others more than ourselves (1 Corinthians 10:31-33, 10:24, 8:12-13). We would not offend others if we thought more of them than ourselves, and acted accordingly.

After reading the above descriptions, can you see why James tells them to abstain from such things? Do you understand why it would be so offensive to the Jews? James tells us in verse 21 that they needed to respect such teaching because it was Moses who taught these laws to the people in many synagogues.

9. The council put these thoughts down in a letter to clear up the confusion. Whom did they choose to carry the letter to Antioch? (vs 22)

10. Whose stamp of approval did the council get? (vs 28)

11. One last question: Are there any liberties that you take in your life that might be offensive to others? Is there something that you need to abstain from in order to keep unity among the brethren? Pray and ask the Holy Spirit to search your heart on this one and reveal anything He wants you to see.

That's all for today. It was a lot of reading, but wow, did we learn a lot! Can you find one **"Reason to Rejoice"** in today's lesson?

Fourth Day

Repeat your memory verse to someone in your family, and explain to them what it means.

Today we begin our study with Paul, Barnabas, Judas and Silas delivering the letter from the council to the believers in Antioch.

1. Read Acts 15:30-41.
2. How was the letter received? (vs 31)

** This letter was also an encouragement to the churches that Paul visited on his second missionary journey. Acts 16:5 says that the churches were strengthened in their faith, and their numbers increased.

3. What does verse 32 tell us about Judas and Silas? What did these two men do while they stayed in Antioch?

Now begins Paul's second missionary journey, with a change of traveling companions.

4. What was the purpose of this trip? (Acts 15:36)
5. Paul and Barnabas agreed on the purpose of the trip, but what did they disagree about? (vs 37-38) Why? (Read Acts 13:13)
6. What was the result of this disagreement? Did anything good come from it? How did God use it for His glory?
7. Who became the two missionary teams?

Barnabas was determined that Mark go with them on this trip. But Paul was just as determined that he wouldn't. Remember that Mark and Barnabas were cousins. Could this be why Barnabas was willing to give Mark another chance? Or did Barnabas live up to his name, and encourage everyone? Had Paul forgotten that it was Barnabas who took Paul himself under his wing? Was Paul afraid that Mark would desert the team again, like he did before? Who was right? Can Godly men ever disagree?

We don't know who was right or wrong with the small amount of facts we have. Maybe both were right in some ways, and wrong in some. It doesn't really matter. We do know that even Godly men can disagree and can continue on in their ministries.

8. Were Paul and Mark ever reunited? Read Philemon 23-24, Colossians 4:10 and 2 Timothy 4:11. How is Mark described?

9. Did Paul and Barnabas ever mend their friendship? Read 1 Cor. 9:6.

10. How should you handle disagreements within your family? Within the ministry? Give Scriptures to support your answer.

Barnabas and Mark set off towards Cyprus, the hometown of Barnabas. Paul and Silas went through Syria and Cilicia, revisiting the churches and encouraging them in the Lord. This marks the beginning of Paul's second missionary journey. Barnabas and Mark disappear from Luke's record in the Book of Acts.

Tomorrow we will continue traveling with Paul. But for now, what is your "Reason to Rejoice"?

Fifth Day

Write out your memory verse.

Today we will spend our time reflecting on some lessons learned from this chapter.

1. What did the decision of the Jerusalem council accomplish in a practical sense?

2. Before making decisions, do you ever ask yourself, How will this affect the witness of the church to the lost?

3. Which is more important to you: the right to exercise your freedoms and liberties, or not stumbling a brother?

4. When is compromise right? When is it wrong? Have you been asked to compromise lately? What did you do?

5. What did you learn about God this week?

See you next week. Look for that "**Reason to Rejoice**" every day; and when you find it, tell a friend, and you can rejoice in Jesus together.