

53. The Jerusalem Council Included Much Discussion

In our last topic, we saw why it is important to help our physical and spiritual children understand the decision of the Jerusalem Council. First, we saw that the Pharisees who had become Christians thought that circumcision was necessary for salvation. Second, we saw that those Christians who previously had been Pharisees believed that it was important to command all Gentile believers to keep the law of Moses. In this topic and the next, we will see the way that the Holy Spirit guided the leaders gathered at the Jerusalem Council to a very different decision. That decision made it clear that salvation is by grace alone through faith alone.

In Acts 15:6-9, we read, “Now the apostles and elders came together to consider this matter. And when there had been much dispute, Peter rose up *and* said to them: ‘Men *and* brethren, you know that a good while ago God chose among us, that by my mouth the Gentiles should hear the word of the gospel and believe. So God, who knows the heart, acknowledged them by giving them the Holy Spirit, just as *He did* to us, and made no distinction between us and them, purifying their hearts by faith.’” In these verses, we see that the Jerusalem Council included all of the apostles and elders in Jerusalem. They were not seeking to impose their own opinions. They were not seeking to force others to follow their own convictions.

Instead of their own opinions or convictions, they wanted the will of God made clear through the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Acts 15:28-29 says, “‘For it seemed good to the Holy Spirit, and to us, to lay upon you no greater burden than these necessary things: that you abstain from things offered to idols, from blood, from things strangled, and from sexual immorality. If you keep yourselves from these, you will do well. Farewell.’” Here, we see that the Holy Spirit did lead all of the men gathered to the same decision. That decision took much time, because there was much dispute and many opinions when the leaders first began talking. The word translated “dispute” means *discussion, dispute or questioning one another*. This is the same word used in Acts 15:2 where we read, “Therefore, when Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and dispute with them, they determined that Paul and Barnabas and certain others of them should go up to Jerusalem, to the apostles and elders, about this question.” There was definitely not agreement when the discussion first started so they wanted to know the will of God.

The leaders let everyone else talk first before they began to speak. Finally, Peter began by telling about the conversion of the Gentiles in the house of Cornelius recorded in Acts 10. The men gathered all knew that God had chosen Peter to take the Gospel to the house of Cornelius so that the Gentiles could hear the Gospel and believe. The Gentiles at the house of Cornelius had not been circumcised. They had not been keeping law. They had not been observing the Jewish feasts and ceremonies. Instead, they did hear the Gospel and repented of their sin of unbelief. The Lord told Samuel in 1 Samuel 16:7, “But the Lord said to Samuel, ‘Do not look at his appearance or at the height of his stature, because I have refused him. For *the Lord does not see as man sees*; for man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart.’”

God knew the hearts of the Gentiles in the house of Cornelius. He knew that they had repented and placed their faith in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. As a result, God gave them the

Holy Spirit just as God had done for the apostles and the other Jews who believed on the Day of Pentecost. God did not make a distinction between the way that He saved the Jews and the Gentiles. Instead, God purified the hearts of the Gentiles by faith just as He had done with the Jews.

Acts 15:10-12 says, “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? But we believe that through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ we shall be saved in the same manner as they.’ Then all the multitude kept silent and listened to Barnabas and Paul declaring how many miracles and wonders God had worked through them among the Gentiles.” Here, we see that Peter asked the leaders why they were putting God to the test by trying to add additional requirements for the Gentiles. Peter said that the law had been like a yoke to both those gathered there that day and also to their fathers. Peter said that none of them had been able to fully obey the Law. Peter said that God had saved the Gentiles by His grace. He also reminded each of the leaders gathered there that day that they had also been saved by the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ. The law had never saved any Jew.

After Peter had finished speaking, the whole multitude gave Barnabas and Paul the opportunity to tell what the Lord had done among the Gentiles through their ministry. The word translated “listened” means *to hear so that there is understanding*. Each person wanted to know how the Holy Spirit was leading. These men were Jews and in 1 Corinthians 1:22 we read, “For Jews request a sign, and Greeks seek after wisdom.” Then, Hebrews 2:3-4 says, “How shall we escape if we neglect so great a salvation, which at the first began to be spoken by the Lord, and was confirmed to us by those who heard *Him*, God also bearing witness both with signs and wonders, with various miracles, and gifts of the Holy Spirit, according to His own will?” Since Jews do require a sign, Barnabas and Paul chose to tell about the miracles and wonders that God had worked through them among the Gentiles.

After the murder of James, the brother of John, by Herod, you remember that Herod also imprisoned Peter. When the angel brought Peter out of the prison he went to the house of Mary where many were praying for him. He told those gathered in Acts 12:17, “But motioning to them with his hand to keep silent, he declared to them how the Lord had brought him out of the prison. And he said, ‘Go, tell these things to James and to the brethren.’ And he departed and went to another place.” That is the James that is mentioned here. He was the half-brother of Christ and the one that wrote the book of James. We see already in chapter twelve that he had become the leading elder in the church at Jerusalem. Here, we see that this James now became the final speaker who summarized all that had been said and shared what the Holy Spirit led him to say.

Acts 15:13-18 says, “And after they had become silent, James answered, saying, ‘Men *and* brethren, listen to me: Simon has declared how God at the first visited the Gentiles to take out of them a people for His name. And with this the words of the prophets agree, just as it is written: “After this I will return and will rebuild the tabernacle of David, which has fallen down; I will rebuild its ruins, and I will set it up; so that the rest of mankind may seek the Lord, even all the Gentiles who are called by My name, says the Lord who does all these things.” Known to God from eternity are all His works.” James invited the entire multitude to listen so that there would

be understanding by all of them.

James reminded those gathered that Simon Peter had shared how God had first visited the Gentiles when the Lord sent Peter to the house of Cornelius. God sent Peter there, because it was the plan of God to take from the Gentiles a people for His name. God promised through many of the Old Testament prophets that the day would come when the temple of David would be rebuilt. In that day, the Gentiles will also be included among those who worship the Lord. Amos was one of the Old Testament prophets who wrote about this plan of God when he wrote in Amos 9:11-12, ““On that day I will raise up the tabernacle of David, which has fallen down, and repair its damages; I will raise up its ruins, and rebuild it as in the days of old; that they may possess the remnant of Edom, and all the Gentiles who are called by My name, says the Lord who does this thing.”” The Gentiles did not have to become Jewish proselytes. Here, James makes it clear that both Jews and Gentiles will share in the future what the Lord has for all who follow Him.

God had clearly shown Peter that he was to be the first to take the Gospel to the Gentiles. The Lord also used both Barnabas and Paul to reach out to the Gentiles in Antioch. Later, God also sent Barnabas and Paul to the work while the Lord had called them. Galatians 2:9 tells us that this ministry to the Gentiles had already been recognized by the key leaders of the church. That verse says, ““And when James, Cephas, and John, who seemed to be pillars, perceived the grace that had been given to me, they gave me and Barnabas the right hand of fellowship, that we should go to the Gentiles and they to the circumcised.”” This verse tells us that James, Peter and John had already recognized that Barnabas and Paul had been called to the Gentiles when Barnabas and Paul visited Jerusalem in Acts 11:30 and Acts 12:24-25.

Now, James began his summary by his statement in Acts 15:18, ““Known to God from eternity are all His works.”” In the next topic, we will see the rest of the answer of James, but here we want to see that the plan for the salvation of the Gentiles and Jews from eternity has been to save all who are saved: by grace alone; through faith alone; totally apart from any works. Later, Paul wrote in Romans 3:28-30, ““Therefore we conclude that a man is justified by faith apart from the deeds of the law. Or *is He* the God of the Jews only? *Is He* not also the God of the Gentiles? Yes, of the Gentiles also, since *there is* one God who will justify the circumcised by faith and the uncircumcised through faith.”” The eternal plan of God was to provide salvation and forgiveness of sins through the blood that Christ shed on the cross.

We want to help our physical and spiritual children learn how to fully explain why salvation is totally apart from any works of the law and that salvation is the result of the grace of God. He even gives us the faith to believe so that there are no works about which any person can boast. May the Lord richly bless you as you help your children learn to explain the decision to which the Holy Spirit led the Jerusalem Council.