

54. The Jerusalem Council Was Led by the Holy Spirit

In our last topic, we saw that we want to help our physical and spiritual children learn to explain why the salvation of both Jews and Gentiles is by grace alone through faith alone and totally apart from any works of the law. We also saw that James, the half-brother of Christ, was the one who had become the leader of the church at Jerusalem and that he was the one who summarized how God had this plan for the salvation of both Jews and Gentiles from eternity. Today, we will see the conclusion of the summary of James and the decision of the whole Jerusalem Council and the way that the Holy Spirit led them.

In Acts 15:18-21, we read, “Known to God from eternity are all His works. Therefore I judge that we should not trouble those from among the Gentiles who are turning to God, but that we write to them to abstain from things polluted by idols, *from* sexual immorality, *from* things strangled, and *from* blood. For Moses has had throughout many generations those who preach him in every city, being read in the synagogues every Sabbath.” The plan of God for the salvation of all who would believe was determined by God from eternity.

Then, James went on to explain what the Holy Spirit had revealed. The word translated “trouble” means *to cause trouble or to annoy*. Although this dispute had been caused by Jewish Pharisees that had become Christians, James realized that all of the Jews were zealous for the law. When Paul visited the church many years later, James and the other elders told Paul in Acts 21:20, “And when they heard *it*, they glorified the Lord. And they said to him, ‘You see, brother, how many myriads of Jews there are who have believed, and they are all zealous for the law.’” As a result, James realized that all of the Jews would be tempted to try and get Gentiles to obey the law. The elders spoke of the decision in this chapter when they told Paul in Acts 21:25, “‘But concerning the Gentiles who believe, we have written *and* decided that they should observe no such thing, except that they should keep themselves from *things* offered to idols, from blood, from things strangled, and from sexual immorality.’” These four things go back long before the law and God had revealed His will about each of these things prior to the call of Abraham.

Idols are the works of man’s hands and show that mankind is depending on his own works. Genesis 4:3-5 says, “And in the process of time it came to pass that Cain brought an offering of the fruit of the ground to the Lord. Abel also brought of the firstborn of his flock and of their fat. And the Lord respected Abel and his offering, but He did not respect Cain and his offering. And Cain was very angry, and his countenance fell.” By faith, Abel brought a blood offering as a covering for his sin. In contrast, Cain invented religion and idol worship by trying to bring the works of his own hands to God. God did not respect or accept Cain’s offering, because that would have been salvation by works.

Blood and things strangled were clearly identified by God as things to be avoided when God told Noah in Genesis 9:3-4, “‘Every moving thing that lives shall be food for you. I have given you all things, even as the green herbs. But you shall not eat flesh with its life, *that is*, its blood.’” God was actually protecting Noah and all mankind from all of the diseases carried by the blood. God also gave a positive principle that forbid sexual immorality before sin ever came into the world.

God told Adam and Eve in Genesis 2:24, “Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and they shall become one flesh.” God gave the instruction to Adam, who had no father or mother, “to leave”, because it was a principle for all mankind. Sexual immorality is very destructive to any marriage whether a couple is Christian or not.

Both the Jews and the Gentiles were familiar with these four things although they have been continually violated by both groups. The Jews were familiar with the early chapters of Genesis, because the Old Testament, and particularly the books written by Moses, were read in the synagogues every Sabbath. The Gentiles were familiar with the things written in the first eleven chapters of Genesis, because all people were descendants of Noah and mankind did not divide and go different directions until after the languages were changed in Genesis eleven. Although there are great variations in the stories about the creation of man, the origin of sin, the flood and other things in those first eleven chapters, the things mentioned in those chapters appear in the stories passed down by the fathers in cultures throughout the world. In fact, Romans 1:19-20 says, “Because what may be known of God is manifest in them, for God has shown it to them. For since the creation of the world His invisible *attributes* are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, *even* His eternal power and Godhead, so that they are without excuse.” James and the elders were recognizing the eternal plan of God by mentioning these four things which could cause division between the Jewish and Gentile Christians.

Acts 15:22-23 says, “Then it pleased the apostles and elders, with the whole church, to send chosen men of their own company to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas, *namely*, Judas who was also named Barsabas, and Silas, leading men among the brethren. They wrote this *letter* by them: The apostles, the elders, and the brethren, to the brethren who are of the Gentiles in Antioch, Syria, and Cilicia: Greetings.” Here, we see that not only the apostles and elders, but also the whole church, came to true unity about this question as they were led by the Holy Spirit. This is a real example of the unity of Jews and Gentiles for which Christ prayed the night before He was crucified. John 17:20-21 says, “I do not pray for these alone, but also for those who will believe in Me through their word; that they all may be one, as You, Father, *are* in Me, and I in You; that they also may be one in Us, that the world may believe that You sent Me.” The whole church was now in agreement that the Gentiles were not under the law. The church at Jerusalem also sent Judas and Silas with Paul and Barnabas to take this letter back to the church at Antioch.

Then, we are given a copy of what the church wrote in the letter that they sent. Acts 15:24-29 says, “Since we have heard that some who went out from us have troubled you with words, unsettling your souls, saying, ‘*You must* be circumcised and keep the law’--to whom we gave no *such* commandment--it seemed good to us, being assembled with one accord, to send chosen men to you with our beloved Barnabas and Paul, men who have risked their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. We have therefore sent Judas and Silas, who will also report the same things by word of mouth. 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.” This is a key to understanding the fact that Jews and Gentiles are one in Christ and we are to learn how to function as one body.

The church at Jerusalem recognized several things in this letter. They recognized that the people who were troubling the Gentiles had come from the church in Jerusalem. They recognized that these people were unsettling the souls of the Gentiles. They recognized that these people were teaching things that had not been taught by the apostles and other leaders of the church. The word translated “troubling” means to *agitate, to stir up, or cause to become anxious and fearful*. The word translated “unsettling” means to *overthrow or to cause to go bankrupt*. Here, we see that these individuals had been causing the Gentile Christians to be upset in their thinking and emotions so that they were becoming emotionally drained or emotionally empty.

The church at Jerusalem wrote that they had not taught the things that these Judaizers were teaching. Those were things that these individuals were adding to Christianity because of their own background. The church at Jerusalem said that they had all met together and that the Holy Spirit had brought them into agreement. As a result, they had chosen men from the church at Jerusalem to come with Barnabas and Paul to bring this letter to Antioch. They also said that they considered Barnabas and Paul beloved brethren. They realized that these two men had risked their lives in order to faithfully serve the Lord Jesus Christ by taking the Gospel to the Gentiles.

The two men that the church at Jerusalem sent with Barnabas and Paul were Judas and Silas. They said that these two men would share the same message that they had written in this letter. Then, the church said that the Holy Spirit had led them to make the decision that is reported in this letter. The Holy Spirit had led them to avoid placing any burden on the Gentiles that would come from the law that was given to Moses. They said the Holy Spirit guided them to request that the Gentiles abstain from the four things God had spoken and shown either to Noah or to those who had lived before the flood. The word translated “abstain” means to *refrain from or to avoid*. Paul used this word in 1 Thessalonians 5:22 where we read, “Abstain from every form of evil.” Then, Peter used this word in 1 Peter 2:11 which says, “Beloved, I beg *you* as sojourners and pilgrims, abstain from fleshly lusts which war against the soul.” The apostles and elders realized that any form of evil will cause a Christian to feel fear, guilt or shame.

Both false teaching, which unsettles the soul, and fleshly lusts will cause a Christian to feel guilty. The leaders of the early church realized that the Holy Spirit wanted to set Christians free from the consequences of the sin of Adam and Eve. From this point on, those who would continue to teach Gentiles they had to be circumcised and keep the law would show that they were false teachers or immature Christians who were deceived. The leaders also realized that they wanted to help Gentile Christians reverse the effects of the sin of Adam and Eve by removing their fear, guilt and shame. We also want to help our physical and spiritual children learn to be free from the consequences of original sin so that they do not continue to live with fear, guilt and shame. May the Lord richly bless you as you help other Christians learn to understand this freedom in Christ.