

Acts 15:22-35: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] Acts chapter 15 verses 22 to 35. Then it seemed good to the apostles and the elders, with the whole church, to choose men from among them and send them to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas.

They sent Judas, called Barsabbas, and Silas, leading men among the brothers, with the following letter. The brothers, both the apostles and the elders, to the brothers who are of the Gentiles in Antioch and Syria and Cilicia, greetings.

Since we have heard that some persons have gone out from us and troubled you with words, unsettling your minds, although we gave them no instructions, it has seemed good to us, having come to one accord, to choose men and send them 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 themselves will tell you the same things by word of mouth, for it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to lay on you no greater burden than these requirements, that you abstain from what has been sacrificed to idols and from blood and from what has been strangled and from sexual immorality.

If you keep yourselves from these, you will do well. Farewell. So when they were sent off, they went down to Antioch, and having gathered the congregation together, they delivered the letter.

[1 : 1 9] After the Jerusalem council in Acts chapter 15, the council writes a letter communicating their judgment, and emissaries are appointed to bear it to Antioch, Syria and Cilicia.

The letter largely repeats the statements made by James at the conclusion of the council's deliberations. The apostles and elders of Jerusalem want to appoint some representatives of Jerusalem to accompany Paul and Barnabas back to Antioch.

We should recall that Barnabas himself had initially been a representative of the Jerusalem church, sent to Antioch in chapter 11 verse 22. He had stayed in Antioch for at least a year after that, ministering there.

And after that time, he had accompanied Paul on a visit to Jerusalem at the end of chapter 11, bringing relief to the Christians in Jerusalem. They had returned at the end of chapter 12.

And we read nothing about what occurred to Paul and Barnabas on that particular journey to Jerusalem in the book of Acts. But the book of Galatians describes a private meeting with the pillars of the Jerusalem church after Paul went there with Barnabas and Titus.

[2 : 4 5] During the visit, according to Paul's account in Galatians, he set before the Jerusalem leaders the message that he and Barnabas bore to the Gentiles. They had given Paul and Barnabas the right hand of fellowship, recognising that Paul had been entrusted with the mission to the uncircumcised in a manner comparable to the way that Peter was the chief minister entrusted with the mission to the circumcised.

If it was not already his principal base before he had returned from Jerusalem, Antioch was definitely the focus of Barnabas' mission thereafter. At the beginning of chapter 13, Barnabas is listed as one of the prophets and teachers of the Antioch church, alongside Saul, whom he had brought there from Tarsus at the end of chapter 11.

The Antioch church then set apart Barnabas and Saul for the mission, according to the word of the Spirit. Now they are back in Jerusalem again, albeit under slightly more complicated circumstances. At this point in the church's history, Jerusalem is still very much the centre. It's the place with the greatest influence and power. Antioch is a church of growing importance and the doorway to the Gentile mission.

The relationship between these two churches is of immense significance. If these two churches were to part ways, or if Antioch were simply to adapt to the demands of the Christians of a more

Pharisaic persuasion in Jerusalem, the entire formation of a united Jew and Gentile church might founder, or never truly get off the ground to begin with.

[4 : 13] Strengthening the bonds between these churches could not be more important. At this juncture, the bond is mostly one forged by a few key ministers, such as Paul and Barnabas, and also by the relief provided by the Christians in Antioch to the poor Christians in Judea.

The visit of the men from James, who had insisted that the Gentiles in Antioch needed to be circumcised, was near disastrous. It was a threat to the Gentile mission in its very infancy, and it was a strain upon the fragile relationship between the two churches.

Arriving at such a favourable judgement for the Gentile mission was immensely important, and naturally it would be a cause for considerable rejoicing when it was shared with the church in Antioch.

The Jerusalem church sent some of their leading men, Silas and Judas called Barsabbas, to strengthen the connection between the churches. They also laid to rest any confusion that might have arisen from the earlier visit of the Judaizers from Jerusalem.

They were teachers that had gone out from Jerusalem, and they had unsettled the minds of the Christians in Antioch, but they had not been sent on their mission by the apostles and elders. Their message was not approved.

[5 : 21] To make sure that the message is communicated beyond any dispute, the council send these representatives of Jerusalem to confirm the judgement of the council by their own testimony, and to strengthen the bond between the churches by ministering among them for a time.

The Jerusalem church also affirms their respect and love for Barnabas and Paul, commending their missionary ventures, which they did not consider controversial at all, but were in one mind and approving.

They list the only four requirements that they would place upon them, abstaining from things sacrificed to idols, from blood, from things strangled, and from sexual immorality. The nature of these restrictions has been a matter of debate.

Paul teaches against idol meat in 1 Corinthians chapters 8-10. There he begins with some arguments focusing on giving up freedom for the sake of others, so as not to scandalise them or harm their conscience.

In 1 Corinthians chapter 8 verses 8-13, Food will not commend us to God. We are no worse off if we do not eat, and no better off if we do. But take care that this right of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak.

[6 : 29] For if anyone sees you who have knowledge, eating in an idol's temple, will he not be encouraged, if his conscience is weak, to eat food offered to idols? And so, by your knowledge, this weak person is destroyed, the brother for whom Christ died.

Thus, sinning against your brothers and wounding their conscience when it is weak, you sin against Christ. Therefore, if food makes my brother stumble, I will never eat meat, lest I make my brother stumble.

Later Paul moves to some more absolute arguments against certain forms of participation in idol meat, showing that such meat represented association with demons themselves. 1 Corinthians chapter 10 verses 14-22 Therefore, my beloved, flee from idolatry.

I speak as to sensible people. Judge for yourselves what I say. The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a participation in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a participation in the body of Christ?

Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread. Consider the people of Israel. Are not those who eat the sacrifices participants in the altar?

[7 : 38] What do I imply then? That food offered to idols is anything? Or that an idol is anything? No, I imply that what pagan sacrifice they offer to demons and not to God.

I do not want you to be participants with demons. You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons. You cannot partake of the table of the Lord and the table of demons.

Shall we provoke the Lord to jealousy? Are we stronger than he? In his teaching then, Paul makes allowances for the possible difficulties that Gentiles might have in obtaining food without any sort of association with idols, making clear that the meat was not unclean in itself and that outside of a context where they would knowingly and openly be participating in a meal that was associated with the worship of idols, they could eat any meat without asking any questions.

1 Corinthians 10 25-33 continues the argument in this way. Eat whatever is sold in the meat market without raising any question on the ground of conscience, for the earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof.

If one of the unbelievers invites you to dinner and you are disposed to go, eat whatever is set before you without raising any question on the ground of conscience. But if someone says to you, This has been offered in sacrifice, then do not eat it for the sake of the one who informed you and for the sake of conscience.

[9 : 01] I do not mean your conscience, but his. For why should my liberty be determined by someone else's conscience? If I partake with thankfulness, why am I denounced because of that for which I give thanks?

So whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God. Give no offence to Jews or to Greeks or to the church of God, just as I try to please everyone in everything I do, not seeking my own advantage, but that of many, that they may be saved.

Much of the purpose of this commandment as Paul describes it seems to be to ensure that Jews are not given a cause of offence by Gentiles in the church. The Gentiles should be mindful of Jewish scruples.

However, this commandment is also there in order that they might keep a clear distance from the idolatry that permeated the whole of pagan society, being careful not to compromise in a matter where it would be very easy to do so.

We should also observe that restrictions upon food sacrificed to idols were applied to Gentiles living among the Israelites in the book of Leviticus, in chapter 17, verse 7 to 9 of that book.

[10 : 06] So they shall no more sacrifice their sacrifices to goat demons after whom they whore. This shall be a statute forever for them throughout their generations. And you shall say to them, Anyone of the house of Israel or of the strangers who sojourn among them, who offers a burnt offering or sacrifice and does not bring it to the entrance of the tent of meeting to offer it to the Lord, that man shall be cut off from his people.

The restrictions upon consuming blood and eating strangled animals go together. The strangling of the animal was designed as a means of keeping the blood within. This goes back to Genesis and the commandment given to Noah in chapter 9, verses 3 to 4.

Every moving thing that lives shall be food for you. And as I gave you the green plants, I give you everything. But you shall not eat flesh with its life, that is, its blood.

The same requirement to refrain from blood is given to the Gentiles living among the Jews in Leviticus chapter 17, verses 10 to 14, the passage that immediately follows the one that we read earlier.

If anyone of the house of Israel or of the strangers who sojourn among them eats any blood, I will set my face against that person who eats blood and will cut him off from among his people.

[11 : 19] For the life of the flesh is in the blood, and I have given it for you on the altar to make atonement for your souls. For it is the blood that makes atonement by the life. Therefore I have said to the people of Israel, no person among you shall eat blood, neither shall any stranger who sojourns among you eat blood.

Anyone also of the people of Israel or of the strangers who sojourn among them, who takes in hunting any beast or bird that may be eaten, shall pour out its blood and cover it with earth.

For the life of every creature is its blood, its blood is its life. Therefore I have said to the people of Israel, you shall not eat the blood of any creature, for the life of every creature is its blood.

Whoever eats it shall be cut off. This prohibition then was not exclusive to Jews, but was more general to all peoples. It arises from the connection between the life of creatures and their blood, a connection comparable to the connection between the soul and the eyes, for instance.

It's not a literal identification of one with the other, but a symbolic manifestation of the one in the other. It should also be understood in the context of a sacrificial system. As God said to his people, I have given it for you on the altar to make atonement for your souls, for it is the blood that makes atonement by the life.

[12 : 32] In a context where blood sacrifices were being made, ingesting blood would have great significance. The question of whether this applies in the same way in societies where that symbolic bond does not function in the same way, where we're no longer sacrificing animals and engaging in blood rites, and where there is little chance of causing scandal to others, is a question upon which Christians differ.

Many European societies, for instance, though traditionally Christian, have eaten blood puddings. The final prohibition is upon sexual immorality. Why single out sexual immorality at this point? The other prohibitions concern foods, but this seems to be a more directly moral issue. A few things might be noted on this front. First, sexual immorality connected with the other commandments in its more direct relationship to purity concerns.

Sins such as, let's say, stealing, were morally prohibited, but didn't have the same relationship to purity as the defilement caused by sexual immorality. Second, attitudes to sexual conduct were among the most pronounced differences between Jews and Gentiles.

Many of the other requirements of the law might have been affirmed by pagan ethicists, but attitudes to sexual behaviour could be different in very pronounced ways. Third, sexual immorality of various kinds was a further aspect of the commandments of Leviticus that applied to Jews and Gentiles alike.

[13 : 53] The council, then, it would seem, is simply affirming that the Gentiles need to observe the commandments that were placed upon Gentile sojourners among Israel, rather than needing to observe the whole law of Moses.

The emissaries return with Paul and Barnabas to Antioch. When the congregation is gathered together, the letter from the Jerusalem council is read, and it meets with great joy. Having considered the situation that the Antioch church was in, the cause for their joy should be quite evident.

A very great deal was riding upon the response of the Jerusalem church. Had their message been a rebuke, the entire direction of the church would have changed, and the nature of the whole Christian movement would have been plunged into uncertainty.

Indeed, it had been in such uncertainty after the teaching of the Judaizers who came from Jerusalem, until this letter resolved it. Judas and Silas, who had been sent up from Jerusalem, remained there for some time, ministering among them, further strengthening the bond between the two key churches of Antioch and Jerusalem.

The Jerusalem Christians are then sent back to Jerusalem. Verse 34, which refers to Silas deciding to stay, is omitted by most texts. While it might help us to explain why Silas is seemingly in Antioch, to accompany Paul on his second missionary journey a few verses later, it probably is not in the original text.

[15 : 11] And there are plenty of other explanations for why Silas could have returned, or not even left. Luke just doesn't explain why. Paul and Barnabas remain in Antioch and continue to minister there, alongside many other ministers.

It seems that the work of Christ there is really growing. A question to consider. How does Paul's treatment of issues of sexual morality differ from his treatment of idle food in the book of 1 Corinthians?

How might reflecting upon Paul's teaching and the teaching of Leviticus chapters 17 and 18 help us better to understand the place of these commandments in the life of the people of God today?

