

Acts Chapter 15

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Preacher: Marvin Wiseman

[0 : 00] We are continuing with Acts chapter 15. It is a very, very pivotal chapter in the book of Acts, and interestingly enough, it's about halfway through. I want you to keep in mind that the Acts of the Apostles, 28 chapters, transpired over a period of three decades.

It took 30 years for those events from the ascension of Christ that is recorded in Acts chapter 1 until you get back to chapter 28 where the Apostle Paul has been released from his first imprisonment and has been set free or will be set free.

So there are 30 years in the making there, and it's important to keep that in mind. And the controversy that surfaced and is maintained has to do with non-Jewish people who are Gentiles, which of course comprises 99% of the world population today, and then probably 99% as well. Gentiles were placing their faith and trust in this Jewish Messiah. So while it is true that Jesus, as a Jew, came to the nation Israel, it is also true that his own, John 1, received him not.

But as many as received him, to them gave he power or authority to become the sons of God simply by believing on his name. So while it is true that Christ came specifically, initially, to the nation of Israel, he came for the whole world.

[1 : 41] And the whole world was to be reached through the instrumentality of Israel. But Israel as a nation rejected the Messiah. God opened an avenue to the Jew, to the Gentile, which is what he had in mind all along, but he wasn't able to use the Jew to do it.

The Jew was raised up of God to be a light to the Gentiles. They weren't interested. So what happens is, God is going to redeem, is going to save and justify one Jew by the name of Saul of Tarsus, and he is going to designate him as the apostle to the Gentiles.

So whereas Paul, or Saul of Tarsus, was earlier in a rejection mode with all the rest of Israel, he had this dramatic conversion on the road to Damascus, and God raised him up to be the apostle to the Gentiles.

So he and Barnabas comprised this first team, first missionary team, and bear in mind that Paul the apostle had been converted, had become a believer in Christ, and was preaching Christ in the synagogues, the Jewish synagogues, etc., that he was the Messiah.

And he was doing this on a regular basis, and it was not until after 15 years, well, possibly 13, but as many possibly as 15, that he had been converted to Christ, that he took this first missionary journey.

[3 : 16] Some people think that Paul got saved and then started his missionary journey. Not so at all. He did begin preaching Christ in the synagogues right there in Damascus.

As soon as Ananias laid hands on him and he received his sight, he immediately began preaching Christ there in Syria, in Damascus, in the Jewish synagogue. But it wasn't until 13 to 15 years after his conversion that the first missionary journey is undertaken, and that is recorded in Acts 13 that we've considered before.

So now, the big flaming issue is, what are you going to do with all of these Gentiles? Because they are multiplying like crazy.

The dynamic of evangelism is that those who know the truth, who know the gospel, who have received Christ as their Savior, communicate that to others.

And when the others receive that same message, what do they do? They communicate it to others. That's the dynamic of the gospel. It's each one who is told and believed, tells others.

[4 : 22] That's how the message spreads. It is a magnificent thing, and the explosive power of this gospel among the Gentiles was just overwhelming.

Meanwhile, the Jewish nation, as a people, are still stuck. As a nation, they are still stuck in their unbelief. And Romans 9, 10, and 11 explains where Israel is in connection with everything that's

going on now in the New Testament world with the Gentiles.

So you've got this huge number of Gentiles. But the headquarters and the foundation of Christianity still remains with the Jew.

Because you've got to understand that Judaism is the birthplace of Christianity. We often speak of the Judeo-Christian ethic and belief system.

Because all that is Christian originally began with Judaism. And many Christians today don't understand that concept.

[5 : 30] In fact, it would be a safe thing to say that the logical conclusion of Judaism is Christianity. This is what the book of Hebrews is all about.

It is coming from that old covenant into the new covenant. And this is why Jews today, who come to faith in Jesus Christ, refer to themselves not as converted Jews, but as completed Jews.

Because that's exactly what Christianity is. It is the completion or the fruition or the fulfillment of Judaism. And the center point of that is sacrifice.

The Jew was very familiar with that. And God established the sacrificial system and ingrained that into the Old Testament people so that when Christ died on that cross, they would be able to connect the dots.

And sacrifice, without the shedding of blood, there is no remission. Sacrifice involves the death of the innocent in the place and in the stead of the guilty.

[6 : 44] And they are conditioned by this whole sacrificial system of the animals for hundreds and hundreds of years. And this is what gave real meaning and value then and connection to the death of Christ on that cross.

But many, of course, did not believe that he was sent from God. So these Gentiles who did believe that and came to faith in Jesus as the Messiah, the Jews are scratching their head and saying, what is this?

What's going on? You know, when Paul wrote his second epistle, I'm sorry, Peter. Peter wrote his second epistle. He said something. Remember the trouble he had in going to Cornelius?

The sheet let down three times. He didn't want to go. He went under duress. And that was to open the door to the Gentiles. And Peter couldn't figure out what was going on.

Because they received the Spirit of God just like we did on the day of Pentecost. And these aren't Jews. They're Gentiles. What is this? And he wrote in his second epistle, I think in that last chapter, Peter said, you see, brethren, how that our beloved brother Paul wrote things that are hard to be understood.

[7 : 56] What does that mean? I mean, Peter was one of the principal. In fact, he was the principal apostle under the twelve. It was Peter, James and John.

And Peter is saying, you know, Paul wrote some things that I'm really having trouble getting a hold on. Hard to be understood. I think what he was talking about was what God was doing through the apostle Paul to the Gentiles.

And Peter still is struggling with that and having a problem with that. Because that doesn't seem to be the way the program is supposed to go. This is a Jewish thing. And it is as if God is saying, listen, Israel, you had your opportunity.

You rejected your Messiah. Now I'm turning to the Gentiles. And Israel is taken and set aside in their unbelief. They remain there today.

There is salvation available for the Jews, but it is the same as the Gentiles. It's on an individual basis. And salvation, the salvation of the soul is not institutional.

[9 : 07] It's personal. This is why we talk about receiving Christ as one's personal Savior. So with all of this hubbub and confusion going on, what are we going to do with all of these Gentiles?

I mean, these people are, they're believing all over the place. There are thousands of them. What are we going to do with all of these Gentiles? Well, you've got to make them observe the law.

No. But that only seemed logical. And they've got to be circumcised. No. What do you mean? What have we been keeping this law for? This law of Moses for hundreds of years.

The Sabbath. The diet. The circumcision and all. Are you saying that's all out the window? Yeah. Well, how can that be? It's from God.

God gave the law. God gave the law of Moses. It's eternal. No, it isn't. In fact, Jeremiah 31 talks about the time when God is going to establish a new covenant.

[10:09] Not like the covenant which they broke. What's he talking about? The Old Testament. So that's the flaming issue. And they're having this big conflagration in Jerusalem.

Lots of confusion. Lots of discussion. Lots of arguments and counter-arguments. They're going back and forth on this. And the logical thing is to Judaize these Gentiles. Make them become, in effect, Jews. And that's what this whole thing is all about. So, we are going to read, beginning on page 532, where Peter stands up.

And it's almost as if each one is taking the floor and speaking his piece.

And Peter is just sitting there listening to all of this. And finally, Peter takes the floor. And we read about halfway down on page 532 in the right-hand column.

[11:12] Verse 7 says, when there had been much disputing, much debate, much discussion. And Philip says, after an exhaustive inquiry. Now, it's kind of like they're looking for a conclusion.

Okay, everybody's had their say. Pro and con. Now, Peter stands up. And Peter says, men and brethren, you know how that a good while ago, God made choice among us, that is, among us Jews, that the Gentiles, by my mouth, excuse me, what was the choice that God made? The choice was to send Peter to a Gentile. The Gentiles, by my mouth, should hear the word of the good news, the gospel, and believe.

And God, which knoweth the hearts, bear them witness, giving them the Holy Spirit. Now, he's referring to that phenomena that happened back in Acts 10 with Cornelius.

Giving them the Holy Spirit, even as he did unto us. Now, he's referring to the day of Pentecost, when Israel experienced the arrival of the Holy Spirit, and 3,000 were saved.

[12:37] And he says, purifying their hearts. This is the cleansing. It is a cleansing from sin that takes place in the human spirit.

Sometimes, and here it's referred to as our hearts, because heart refers to the core of our being. It's not the physical heart, of course, but it's the spiritual essence or substance of belief.

Purifying their hearts by faith. Now, therefore, why tempt you God? Why are you provoking God? The 20th century New Testament says.

To put a yoke. You know, a yoke is the artifice that is used to join two animals together.

Like a team of oxen, and the yoke connects them so that they can pull together and stay together.

Why put a yoke upon the neck of the disciples? Of course, this is a spiritual yoke.

[13:39] Which neither our fathers nor we were able to bear. Why weren't they able to bear it? Because of the ingrained nature of human sin.

This is what Paul meant in Romans 8 when he said, For what the law could not do, because it was weak through the flesh.

What does that mean? It means that the law of God, not just the Ten Commandments, but the whole law of God, could not do what needed to be done, because of the weakness of the flesh.

Whose flesh? The flesh of the individuals to whom the law was given. The law is perfect, and just, and holy, and it was a perfect God who gave the law.

But the law was given to imperfect men. The law cannot redeem you. The law cannot make you righteous. The law cannot provide life.

[14:41] All the law can do is show you, you have a need. A need that you cannot fulfill. This is why Paul talked about the law in Galatians, and he said, the law is our schoolmaster.

The law teaches us. The law is our schoolmaster to bring us to Christ. The law tells you, when you look at the law, and you look at your own life, what you see is, failure, failure, failure, failure, failure. Man, I can't do this. I can do some of it, some of the time, but I can't keep all of the law, all of the time. I fail. And this was the basis for animal sacrifice.

So what the law could not do, it could be a schoolmaster or a teacher. The law can reveal your need and your shortcomings, and that's what it does.

But to go for cleansing and forgiveness, you need to go to the source, and that is the person of Christ. And I've used the illustration before that like a little boy uses a stool, climb up to the lavatory and look in the mirror.

[15:53] And when he does, he sees his face is dirty. But he can't take the mirror and wash his face with it. All the mirror does is reveal the need, but it can't take it away.

So then he goes for soap and water to do what the mirror can't do. But the mirror was useful in that it pointed us to the real solution, which was soap and water.

And Christ is our spiritual soap and water. He is the one who cleanses. And this is Peter's conclusion here. Put a yoke upon the disciples, which neither our fathers nor we were able to bear. That is, they couldn't fulfill it. They couldn't measure up to it. They just couldn't. Failed at every turn. But we believe that through the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, grace is, someone says, grace, G-R-A-C-E, grace spells God's riches at Christ's expense.

That's grace. Grace is not earned, nor deserved, nor merited, nor paid for. Grace is a free gift.

[17:07] All you can do is receive it or reject it. You cannot pay for it. You cannot buy it. It is not available at any price. And grace, the dispensing of grace, presupposes unworthiness, undeservedness.

Grace answers a demand that nothing else can. Grace is a free gift. You just receive it. No strings attached.

We are justified by grace through faith plus nothing. It is completely contrary to the way people think, but it is right on with the way God thinks.

We believe that through the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, we shall be saved. And this saved means delivered, rescued from imminent danger.

And in this context, of course, it is eternal danger. And then, after Peter has his say, and he concludes it with this, through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, we shall be saved even as they, he's talking about Gentiles, and he's saying, here Peter is saying, and this is something we need to really understand, guys.

[18:28] Peter is saying, it is by grace that we are saved even though we have been involved in the law, no one has ever been saved by keeping the law.

And law keepers really needed to understand that. Although some do, because if you can be justified on the basis of keeping the law, you have bragging rights.

You can say, I'm saved, I'm going to heaven because I dotted all the I's and crossed all the T's and I observed the law perfectly in every respect and look at me, everybody.

Aren't I something? Well, there won't be any of that kind of boasting. That's the Ephesians 2, 8 and 9. By grace we're saved through faith, that not of ourselves. It's a gift of God lest anyone should boast.

So Peter is here saying, guys, you need to understand, don't you know that even in the midst of all of the laws that we were keeping and everything, we were never saved by that? We're saved by receiving the free gift even as the Gentiles.

[19:36] And then all the multitude kept silence. I can just see these guys sitting here at this conference. I don't know how many there are.

We're not told how many there are. But I can just see them. After Peter stands up, has his say, and sits down, then there is just a pall of silence.

over the whole group. And they're just looking at each other and their eyes are saying to one another, well, what do you think about that?

Hmm. Peter kind of summed it all up, didn't he? And it registered with him. So, when the multitude kept silence, they gave audience to Barnabas and Paul.

And they are the chief ones who have been responsible for all this controversy because of their ministry to the Gentiles and the success of it.

[20:36] Richard? Were all Gentiles lost before that time? Oh, absolutely. Absolutely. And if you want a commentary on that, read Ephesians 2, because there Paul reminds the Gentiles, the Gentile Christians to whom he is writing in Ephesus, and he says, remember, in time past, you Gentiles, you Gentiles were sons of disobedience.

And you were without God, without Christ, without hope in this present world. But now, in Christ Jesus, you are free.

You are accepted. It is a marvelous thing. Ephesians 2 is a great commentary on that. So, we are told that Paul and Barnabas, and by the way, you'll notice the names here, says they gave audience to Barnabas and Paul.

And very shortly, there's going to be a switch, because in the Greek, the way they express dominance or importance of individuals is putting the most important person's name first in the order of the text.

And here, it continues to be Barnabas and Paul. Barnabas and Paul. Actually, it started out Barnabas and Saul. Then it became Barnabas and Paul.

[22 : 10] And a little later, it's going to be Paul and Barnabas. Now, that might be something that we could easily overlook, but in the Greek language, it says something, and it says that this missionary team started out, Barnabas was the lead guy.

Remember, Barnabas was the only one who had any confidence in Saul of Tarsus and actually believed his conversion. And then, it wasn't long because Paul or Saul was the one who was called to be the apostle to the Gentiles and not Barnabas.

But both of these, of course, are Jews and Barnabas is going to share in that. Roger, did you have a comment or question? In verse 11, when Peter says we shall be saved, does that shall mean a future?

No, it refers to just the statement of a premise that believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and you shall be saved, that kind of thing. I have heard commentary that the whole nation as a whole will turn to Christ in tribulation, I presume.

Well, I think that is true too, but I think he is here just stating a principle that it is through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ that we shall be saved, that we Jews as well as Gentiles.

[23 : 27] Dan? Yes. Was there a sense of exclusivity amongst the Jews regarding the law that they felt because they were Jews they were the only ones to keep the law? Did they ever realize it was impossible to keep the law?

They never accepted that, did they? Well, some of them did. Some of them really realized the ramifications of the law. I'll tell you it, fellas, a part, apart from violations of the Mosaic Law, there was no need and no purpose and no reason for animal sacrifices.

If you kept the law perfectly, and no one ever did, I mean, no one ever did, not even the holiest Jew who ever lived never did, if you kept the law perfectly, theoretically, yeah, you would be accepted of God.

But nobody did. Nobody could because of individual fallenness and our individual sin nature. This is what precipitated the need for the sacrifice.

Sacrifice was only because of sin. And once that was acknowledged, when you brought an animal for sacrifice, you were admitting, up front, you were admitting, I need this.

[24 : 41] I need this substitute because I have erred, I have sinned. And that built into the Jewish psyche that the innocent paid for the guilty.

And that's what gave such tremendous significance, of course, to the death of Christ.