

The Historical Stories of the Acts of the Apostles

Lesson 10 Acts 15:6 – Acts

By AD 50, just twenty years after the resurrection of the Lord, the church leadership was in turmoil. The primary focus of Christianity was sidetracked. The main tenets of the church had been replaced with arguments over ethnic origin and adherence to manmade rules and regulations. Paul has returned to Antioch from his first missionary journey to give a full report. There he meets opposition to his evangelizing of the Gentiles. Judaizers from Judea are there, insisting that the Gentiles be circumcised in order to be saved. Paul opposes them and the church sends them to Jerusalem for a decision from the apostles and elders. Paul and Barnabas are now in Jerusalem to settle the matter for all time.

The Council of Jerusalem – AD 50

Peter's Speech

Acts 15:6 And the apostles and the elders came together to look into this matter. **7** And after there had been much debate, Peter stood up and said to them, "Brethren, you know that in the early days God made a choice among you, that by my mouth the Gentiles should hear the word of the gospel and believe. **8** And God, who knows the heart, bore witness to them, giving them the Holy Spirit, just as He also did to us; **9** and He made no distinction between us and them, cleansing their hearts by faith. **10** Now therefore why do you put God to the test by placing upon the neck of the disciples a yoke which neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear? **11** But we believe that we are saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, in the same way as they also are."

The Judaizers, Jews who wanted Gentiles to convert to Judaism before being saved, are given ample time and opportunity to speak on the matter. We can only wonder why it takes Peter so long to stand and speak. Twenty years of ministry and growth in the Lord have changed his nature. However, when he does speak, he refers to the conversion of Cornelius along with his family and friends in Caesarea in AD 34 - 35, fifteen to sixteen years earlier.¹⁵⁵ Also at that time, he, too, was questioned by the church leaders concerning his actions and the church accepted his explanation. Evidently, the topic was not settled years before because it has shown its ugly head several times in the interim.

Barnabas and Paul Speak

Acts 15:12 And all the multitude kept silent, and they were listening to Barnabas and Paul as they were relating what signs and wonders God had done through them among the Gentiles.

At this point, Barnabas and Paul join the conversation, supporting Peter's position and adding a report of what they have experienced over the past six years. Things work out well for Paul in this debate; he wins.

¹⁵⁵ Acts 10

James Speaks

13 And after they had stopped speaking, James answered, saying, "Brethren, listen to me. **14** Simeon has related how God first concerned Himself about taking from among the Gentiles a people for His name. **15** And with this the words of the Prophets agree, just as it is written, **16** 'AFTER THESE THINGS I will return, AND I WILL REBUILD THE TABERNACLE OF DAVID WHICH HAS FALLEN, AND I WILL REBUILD ITS RUINS, AND I WILL RESTORE IT, **17** IN ORDER THAT THE REST OF MANKIND MAY SEEK THE LORD, AND ALL THE GENTILES WHO ARE CALLED BY MY NAME,' **18** SAYS THE LORD, WHO MAKES THESE THINGS KNOWN FROM OF OLD.¹⁵⁶ **19** Therefore it is my judgment that we do not trouble those who are turning to God from among the Gentiles, **20** but that we write to them that they abstain from things contaminated by idols and from fornication and from what is strangled and from blood. **21** For Moses from ancient generations has in every city those who preach him, since he is read in the synagogues every Sabbath."

James, the half brother of Jesus and the pastor of the church in Jerusalem, makes the final speech and decision. We do not know why he is allowed to speak since he is not an apostle. Nevertheless, he decides to write a letter to all the churches to settle the matter. The decision is not purely in favor of the Gentile way of life. James instructs them to abstain from animals sacrificed to idols, animals that have been strangled, and animals that still contain their blood. They must also abstain from fornication. All are highly offensive to Jews. Therefore, since the Jews have synagogues in just about every city and town in the civilized world, the decision is made to institute these four prohibitions to keep from offending the Jewish brethren who also need to come to the Lord.

James' letter sent by Paul and Barnabas as well as Barsabbas and Silas

Acts 15:22 Then it seemed good to the apostles and the elders, with the whole church, to choose men from among them to send to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas-- Judas called Barsabbas, and Silas, leading men among the brethren, **23** and they sent this letter by them, "The apostles and the brethren who are elders, to the brethren in Antioch and Syria and Cilicia who are from the Gentiles, greetings. **24** Since we have heard that some of our number to whom we gave no instruction have disturbed you with *their* words, unsettling your souls, **25** it seemed good to us, having become of one mind, to select men to send to you with our beloved Barnabas and Paul, **26** men who have risked their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. **27** Therefore we have sent Judas and Silas, who themselves will also report the same things by word of mouth. **28** For it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to lay upon you no greater burden than these essentials: **29** that you abstain from things sacrificed to idols and from blood and from things strangled and from fornication; if you keep yourselves free from such things, you will do well. Farewell."

The church is to be guided under the direction of the Holy Spirit. Jesus had promised that the Holy Spirit would guide them in all truth.¹⁵⁷ The church in Jerusalem carefully discusses all sides of the issues and makes its decision. The Judaizers are

¹⁵⁶ Amos 9:11, 12; Jeremiah 12:15; Isaiah 45:21

¹⁵⁷ John 16:13

silenced, but only for a short time. They are not pleased with the decision of the apostles and the leaders of the church, and they will fight this battle again, in a different setting.

Return to Antioch

Acts 15:30 So, when they were sent away, they went down to Antioch; and having gathered the congregation together, they delivered the letter. **31** And when they had read it, they rejoiced because of its encouragement. **32** And Judas and Silas, also being prophets themselves, encouraged and strengthened the brethren with a lengthy message. **33** And after they had spent time *there*, they were sent away from the brethren in peace to those who had sent them out. **34** ~~[But it seemed good to Silas to remain there.]~~ **35** But Paul and Barnabas stayed in Antioch, teaching and preaching, with many others also, the word of the Lord.

A band of godly men deliver the letter to Antioch. Silas and Judas Barsabbas are inspired preachers who take the lead in defending the instructions of the letter. From there, many of the church leaders depart for missionary work while Paul, Barnabas, and Silas remain in Antioch for a long time.

It only seems logical that the sad encounter that took place between Paul and Peter occurred at this point in the story. Paul mentions the incident in the following passage.

Galatians 2:11-21 But when Cephas came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he stood condemned. **12** For prior to the coming of certain men from James, he used to eat with the Gentiles; but when they came, he *began* to withdraw and hold himself aloof, fearing the party of the circumcision. **13** And the rest of the Jews joined him in hypocrisy, with the result that even Barnabas was carried away by their hypocrisy. **14** But when I saw that they were not straightforward about the truth of the gospel, I said to Cephas in the presence of all, "If you, being a Jew, live like the Gentiles and not like the Jews, how *is it that* you compel the Gentiles to live like Jews? **15** "We are Jews by nature, and not sinners from among the Gentiles; **16** nevertheless knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the Law but through faith in Christ Jesus, even we have believed in Christ Jesus, that we may be justified by faith in Christ, and not by the works of the Law; since by the works of the Law shall no flesh be justified. **17** "But if, while seeking to be justified in Christ, we ourselves have also been found sinners, is Christ then a minister of sin? May it never be! **18** "For if I rebuild what I have *once* destroyed, I prove myself to be a transgressor. **19** "For through the Law I died to the Law, that I might live to God. **20** "I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the *life* which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me, and delivered Himself up for me. **21** "I do not nullify the grace of God; for if righteousness *comes* through the Law, then Christ died needlessly."

Peter had probably made the 300 mile journey to Antioch to see how things were going and he mingled with Gentile Greek Christians in complete freedom. But rumors make their way back to Jerusalem of Peter's associations and the Judaizers

take the opportunity to reopen the topic settled in AD 50 at the council of Jerusalem. The Judaizers threaten Peter and all the Jewish brethren, who submit to their threats and side with the Judaizer's demands. Paul stands up against them all and wins them back. It is another major crisis of debate in the church that is only 20 years old. The issue is handled this time in Antioch where it began.

Paul and Barnabas disagree over John Mark

Acts 15:36 And after some days Paul said to Barnabas, "Let us return and visit the brethren in every city in which we proclaimed the word of the Lord, *and see how they are.*" **37** And Barnabas was desirous of taking John, called Mark, along with them also. **38** But Paul kept insisting that they should not take him along who had deserted them in Pamphylia and had not gone with them to the work. **39** And there arose such a sharp disagreement that they separated from one another, and Barnabas took Mark with him and sailed away to Cyprus. **40** But Paul chose Silas and departed, being committed by the brethren to the grace of the Lord. **41** And he was traveling through Syria and Cilicia, strengthening the churches.

It had been over six years since John Mark left the team in Perga, but Paul had not forgotten his desertion. In addition, the relationship with Barnabas is strained because of Paul's strong words to him in the controversy with the Judaizers. Barnabas wants to take John Mark on the missionary journey and Paul will not let it happen. Barnabas teams with John Mark and heads to Cyprus while Paul teams with Silas and heads to Syria and Cilicia to deliver James' letter and explain its meaning. Barnabas and John Mark travel by water; Paul and Silas travel by land. Paul's second missionary journey begins.

| Second Missionary Journey (Incomplete) | | | |
|--|------------------------------------|-------|--------------|
| Departure | Arrival | Miles | Via |
| Antioch | Through Syria and Cilicia to Derbe | 225 | land |
| Debe | Lystra | 60 | land |
| Lystra | Iconium | 20 | land |
| Icromium | Troas | 475 | land |
| Troas | Philippi | 150 | water & land |
| Philippi | Thessalonica | 150 | land |

To Derbe then Lystra – Timothy is circumcised by Paul

Acts 16:1 And he came also to Derbe and to Lystra. And behold, a certain disciple was there, named Timothy, the son of a Jewish woman who was a believer, but his father was a Greek, **2** and he was well spoken of by the brethren who were in Lystra and Iconium. **3** Paul wanted this man to go with him; and he took him and circumcised him because of the Jews who were in those parts, for they all knew that his father was a Greek. **4** Now while they were passing through the cities, they were delivering the decrees, which had been decided upon by the apostles and elders who were in Jerusalem, for them to observe. **5** So the churches were being strengthened in the faith, and were increasing in number daily.

It is at this point in the story that we meet Timothy for the first time. The Judaizers have caused enough stir in the church that Paul decides to circumcise Timothy in order to keep that controversy to a minimum. Nevertheless, Paul's purpose in the

journey has changed somewhat to one of instruction rather than one of evangelism. Even though Paul still shares the gospel news just as he had on the first missionary journey, this time another message shares the stage. He continues to present and explain James' letter in all the cities.

To Troas

Acts 16:⁶And they passed through the Phrygian and Galatian region, having been forbidden by the Holy Spirit to speak the word in Asia; ⁷and when they had come to Mysia, they were trying to go into Bithynia, and the Spirit of Jesus did not permit them; ⁸and passing by Mysia, they came down to Troas. ⁹And a vision appeared to Paul in the night: a certain man of Macedonia was standing and appealing to him, and saying, "Come over to Macedonia and help us." ¹⁰And when he had seen the vision, immediately we sought to go into Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to preach the gospel to them.

This short passage does not indicate the work of Paul on this journey, but make no mistake, Paul is constantly sharing the two messages as he travels. He is also keen to the guidance of the Holy Spirit, staying away from the places that will damage the work of the Lord during this missionary journey.

To Philippi

Acts 16:¹¹Therefore putting out to sea from Troas, we ran a straight course to Samothrace, and on the day following to Neapolis; ¹²and from there to Philippi, which is a leading city of the district of Macedonia, a *Roman* colony; and we were staying in this city for some days. ¹³And on the Sabbath day we went outside the gate to a riverside, where we were supposing that there would be a place of prayer; and we sat down and began speaking to the women who had assembled. ¹⁴And a certain woman named Lydia, from the city of Thyatira, a seller of purple fabrics, a worshiper of God, was listening; and the Lord opened her heart to respond to the things spoken by Paul. ¹⁵And when she and her household had been baptized, she urged us, saying, "If you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come into my house and stay." And she prevailed upon us.

For the first time in this letter we see Paul changing his habits. Usually on the Sabbath, he would go to the synagogue to reason with the Jews. There are several synagogues in Philippi and we can only wonder why Paul does not enter one of them to worship that day. Nevertheless, he decides to go to the riverside, seeking a peaceful place to pray. It is there that he meets Lydia and her life is changed.

Lydia is a Gentile who had a reverence for the Lord. The Lord opens her heart with the words of Paul and she becomes a believer, the first in Europe. As an industrious woman, she apparently possesses considerable wealth, offering Paul and his companions a place to stay and eat in Philippi. Paul accepts her offer and they go with her to her home.

In Prison in Philippi

Demon-possessed girl proclaims the Most High God

Acts 16:¹⁶And it happened that as we were going to the place of prayer, a certain slave-girl having a spirit of divination met us, who was bringing her

masters much profit by fortunetelling. ¹⁷Following after Paul and us, she kept crying out, saying, "These men are bond-servants of the Most High God, who are proclaiming to you the way of salvation." ¹⁸And she continued doing this for many days. But Paul was greatly annoyed, and turned and said to the spirit, "I command you in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her!" And it came out at that very moment.

Day after day, Paul and his team returns to the riverside to pray. Day after day, they are bothered by a demon-possessed slave-girl. It is interesting that the demons never fail to proclaim the Most High God as who He is. ¹⁵⁸ Neither can they fail to proclaim to the world the men who serve the Most High God. Very few Christians and Jews are ready to proclaim God to the world, yet the demons cannot hold their testimony quiet. Paul rids her of the demon.

Girl's masters drags Paul before the judges

Acts 16:¹⁹ But when her masters saw that their hope of profit was gone, they seized Paul and Silas and dragged them into the market place before the authorities, ²⁰and when they had brought them to the chief magistrates, they said, "These men are throwing our city into confusion, being Jews, ²¹and are proclaiming customs which it is not lawful for us to accept or to observe, being Romans." ²²And the crowd rose up together against them, and the chief magistrates tore their robes off them, and proceeded to order *them* to be beaten with rods. ²³And when they had inflicted many blows upon them, they threw them into prison, commanding the jailer to guard them securely; ²⁴and he, having received such a command, threw them into the inner prison, and fastened their feet in the stocks.

In Philippi, the courts of the common people are found in the marketplaces where disputes between transactions can be handled quickly. The men who own this slave-girl are incensed because they make their fortune displaying her demonic behavior before the normal people for a price. The ability of these men to have Paul and Silas thrown in jail is actually precipitated by a decree from Claudius Caesar the year before. Claudius was fed up with the Jews in Rome and commanded that they leave the country. Later in this story, Paul will meet Aquila and Priscilla who have left their home in Rome because of this order.¹⁵⁹ Jews in Philippi could not cause a stir and since Paul had disrupted the business of the masters, they were beaten and thrown in jail.

A midnight earthquake sets the scene for the salvation of the jailer

Acts 16:²⁵ But about midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns of praise to God, and the prisoners were listening to them; ²⁶and suddenly there came a great earthquake, so that the foundations of the prison house were shaken; and immediately all the doors were opened, and everyone's chains were unfastened. ²⁷And when the jailer had been roused out of sleep and had seen the prison doors opened, he drew his sword and was about to kill himself, supposing that the prisoners had escaped. ²⁸But Paul cried out with a loud voice,

¹⁵⁸ Acts 16:17

¹⁵⁹ Acts 18:2

saying, "Do yourself no harm, for we are all here!" ²⁹And he called for lights and rushed in and, trembling with fear, he fell down before Paul and Silas, ³⁰and after he brought them out, he said, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" ³¹And they said, "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you shall be saved, you and your household." ³²And they spoke the word of the Lord to him together with all who were in his house. ³³And he took them that *very* hour of the night and washed their wounds, and immediately he was baptized, he and all his *household*. ³⁴And he brought them into his house and set food before them, and rejoiced greatly, having believed in God with his whole household.

The jailer puts the team in jail that day and carefully watches them in fear of his own life. When the earthquake occurs at midnight, the jailer fears that his prisoners have escaped and seeks to take his own life, as was the custom in the Roman Empire. Remember earlier, the angel took Peter out of the jail and the sixteen jailers were immediately executed.¹⁶⁰ Here, Paul stops the jailer and the scene is set for his salvation and the salvation of the entire family. It is interesting that the jailer takes the team from the jail to his home. The jailers were responsible for the prisoners, but they did not have to keep them in a prison. On this day the jailer takes them home, introduces them to his family, and they are all saved.

Acts 16:³⁵ Now when day came, the chief magistrates sent their policemen, saying, "Release those men." ³⁶And the jailer reported these words to Paul, saying, "The chief magistrates have sent to release you. Now therefore, come out and go in peace." ³⁷But Paul said to them, "They have beaten us in public without trial, men who are Romans, and have thrown us into prison; and now are they sending us away secretly? No indeed! But let them come themselves and bring us out." ³⁸And the policemen reported these words to the chief magistrates. And they were afraid when they heard that they were Romans, ³⁹and they came and appealed to them, and when they had brought them out, they kept begging them to leave the city. ⁴⁰And they went out of the prison and entered *the house of Lydia*, and when they saw the brethren, they encouraged them and departed.

The policeman finds Paul and the team at the home of the jailer where he gives them the news that they are released from imprisonment. Paul is not happy with the news because he has not had the opportunity to question why he, a Roman citizen, was beaten and put in jail. When the policeman reports Paul's unhappiness, the rulers are afraid. The *Lex Valeria* of 509 BC and the *Lex Poscia* of 248 BC had made it a crime to inflict blows of punishment on a Roman citizen. Just prior to this incident Claudius Caesar had taken away the freedom of the city officials of Rhodes because they had crucified a Roman citizen. Paul and the team had been punished without a trial, and Paul knew it was a crime. Others in the city knew they were Roman citizens and when he tells them of their error, his citizenship claim is not challenged.¹⁶¹ The rulers submit to Paul requests and let the team go in public view. They return to Lydia's house to say goodbye, and then they make their way to Thessalonica.

¹⁶⁰ Acts 12:18-19

¹⁶¹ Acts 22:27