

=THE BOOK OF ACTS=
Lesson 15
The First Church Trouble - Acts 15

AIM: to teach my pupils the story of Acts 15, especially the truth concerning legalism.

POINT OF CONTACT: Since the lesson is going to apply to the keeping of the Law, and since the Law is referred to in the Bible as a mirror and a plumb line, why not bring both to class and use them as illustrations. Any kind of mirror will be satisfactory. A plumb line can be made by simply tying a piece of string on a heavy object. A bolt is certainly convenient for this. You hold it by the end of the string with the bolt or heavy object at the bottom. Hang it beside something to reveal whether that something is straight or crooked. This can be used later in the lesson to describe the Law and its meaning.

INTRODUCTION: There had been opposition prior to this from outside of the church. Now we have the first serious trouble inside the church. Let us notice how it was handled.

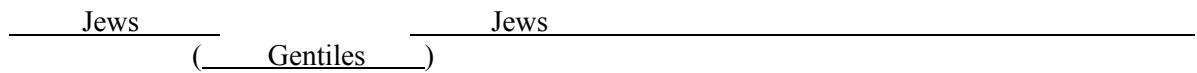
- I. THE ARGUMENT. An argument concerning doctrine arose in the church at Antioch. There were several phases to this argument.
 1. Notice the words, "Except ye be circumcised after the manner of Moses, ye cannot be saved," in Acts 15:1b. It was a Jewish ritual that every male child be circumcised. There arose some Jews teaching that the people at Antioch who had trusted Christ as Saviour were not really saved unless the males had been circumcised. What they were really saying was that you had to become a Jew to be really saved. National pride as well as religious pride caused this.
 2. Notice the words, "and to command them to keep the law of Moses," in Acts 15:5b. There was more than circumcision involved in the argument, as this shows. It was actually a matter of legalism versus grace. Some had crept into the church teaching that a person had to keep the Law and be circumcised in order to be saved. This, of course, was contrary to what Paul and Barnabas had been teaching and preaching, and it caused trouble in the church.

This has been the age-old argument of religion—grace versus works. Man does something to help save himself or God does it all. Every religion will fall into one of these two categories. Cain and Abel were the first to divide over this. Even Adam and Eve showed in the fig leaves the age-old effort on the part of man to save himself, but they needed a coat of skins provided by a sacrifice.

- II. THE TRIP. The church at Antioch decided that since there was dissension, they would send Paul and Barnabas and some others to Jerusalem to talk to the Apostles about the question and see what to do about the church problem. (Acts 15:2-4)
 1. They witnessed on the trip. This is a very interesting thing. Certainly they were in a hurry. The church was having trouble. They were trying to save the church from further trouble. Yet, they witnessed in Phenice and Samaria on the way, telling about how God had saved the Gentiles, causing joy among the Christian people.
 2. They first testified at Jerusalem. Bear in mind, they had come to have their church problems ironed out and to seek advice from more experienced people. Yet, before they went into the matter of business, they testified as to what God had done for them.
- III. THE TRIAL. The matter was brought before the church and the Apostles at Jerusalem. They discussed the matter and heard witnesses; then James, the Pastor, gave a decision as to what ought to be done. Let us notice a few things about the trial.
 1. The first witness was Peter. (Acts 15:7-11) This is a wonderful testimony. Just five chapters ago, Peter was unwilling to preach to the Gentiles. Notice what a change has taken place. The best testimony is by someone who is experienced. Peter certainly carried weight with what he said.
 2. Paul and Barnabas testified in Acts 15:12. These two men had seen great works among the Gentiles, and they told how these, too, had been saved through faith. Of course, this was seen primarily on the missionary journey they had enjoyed together.

3. James (the Pastor of the church at Jerusalem) explained the Gentiles' place in the plan of God. See Acts 15:13-18. He explained how that the Gentiles have been given a dispensation, and now God is choosing out a Gentile bride for the Lord Jesus Christ. He goes further to explain that after the bride is completed, Jesus will come again (verse 16) and will become King over the earth on David's throne. He explained this will be a Jewish kingdom. His big point is, however, that this is the Gentile era—the dispensation of choosing out a Gentile bride or a people for Jesus.

It might be wise for the teacher to draw on the chalkboard a little diagram to explain this. Draw a line on the left across one-third of the chalkboard or paper, starting from the left. End it. About ½ inch below that line, draw another line through the middle one-third of the chalkboard with an arrow pointing toward the right. Put on the top of this line the word "Gentiles." Then go back up to the original position and start the first line again and draw it to the right. Write on it "Jews." Put the lower line in the middle of the page in parenthesis. This will explain how that God turned from the Jews to call out a Gentile people and then will turn back to the Jews in the kingdom. Below is an example:



- IV. THE SENTENCE. Acts 15:19-27. James, being the Pastor of the church, made the decision as to what should be done concerning the church problem. This was advice he was giving to Paul and Barnabas and the brethren from Antioch. This was not done as a pope, but rather as an elder statesman, as a more experienced pastor. The church at Antioch could choose or not choose to do what he said. This was only his advice. You will notice he did not come up to the church to give the advice. He gave it only when they came and asked him for it.
 1. He suggested that the church accept the Gentiles. (Verse 19) Here he is saying that salvation is by grace through faith, and the Gentiles would not need to be circumcised or keep the Law of Moses.
 2. James suggested writing letters to the Gentiles giving them suggestions concerning meat sacrificed to idols, avoiding wrong living, etc. (Verse 20) His suggestion is that the Gentiles not participate in questionable things. Of course, there is nothing wrong with eating meat sacrificed to idols, but if it does cause dissension, we should not do it. There are many things that are all right to do but not wise to do. This was one of them. If something would hurt the church, hurt our testimony, or hurt God's Word, then we should not do it.
 3. Notice in verse 24 the words, "to whom we gave no such commandment." He is here disassociating himself with the false teachers and the legalizers. (Here would be a good place to use the plumb line and the mirror. Show the class what a mirror does. A mirror reveals condition. You might even get a powder box and a powder puff. Rub your nose and make it shiny. The mirror shows you your nose is shiny, but it does not powder your nose. The Law is compared with a mirror. Keeping the Law does not save. The Law was given to show us our condition and to lead us to turn to Christ. Now take the plumb line. Hang it beside a table or a chair. Notice, the plumb line does not straighten the chair. The plumb line only reveals the condition. The Bible is called a plumb line. It reveals our need of Christ.)
- V. THE BY-PRODUCT OF ALL THIS. See Acts 15:22, 32-34. When the brethren went back from Jerusalem to Antioch, you notice that two men went with them. Their names are Judas and Silas. Judas was also called Barsabas. When the two men got back to Jerusalem, Silas, however, decided to stay. This is very interesting because Silas had such a tremendous part in the future of the Apostle Paul and the missionary journeys that followed.
- VI. THE ARGUMENT BETWEEN PAUL AND BARNABAS. Read Acts 15:36-41. Paul and Barnabas were going on their second missionary journey. You will recall they had started the first journey with John Mark, who was Barnabas' nephew. John Mark had turned back in Pamphylia and had gone home.

On this second journey, Barnabas suggested they take John Mark, and Paul refused to do so. There arose an argument between the two. Barnabas decided to go ahead and take John Mark. Paul decided to choose another; hence, he chose Silas, the same man who had come from Jerusalem with Judas to confirm and establish the Christians there. Barnabas is mentioned no more in the Scripture, and Silas becomes a great partner with the Apostle Paul.

MEMORY VERSE: “But we believe that through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ we shall be saved, even as they,” Acts 15:11.