

## **Judgment in Jerusalem**

(Acts 15:13-35)

5/27/20; Wed PM Pine Grove

### **Introduction**

On a normal day, 330,000 people pass through Time Square in New York City.

In a typical year, 50 million people visit Times Square, making it the most visited tourist attraction in the world.

Every New Year's Eve, a million people gather in Times Square to usher in the New Year.

What is interesting about Times Squares is that it is not a town square.

It is essentially an intersection of 7th Avenue and Broadway, which is why many people refer to Times Square as simple the crossroads of the world.

And that is exactly what it is.

It is a simple intersection of streets that symbolizes the insertion of world cultures, languages, and views.

At its base, Times Square is simply Fairview Crossroads with a lot more bells and whistles.

Some crossroads are simply more famous.

In 49 AD, the church was at a crossroads of sorts.

The church had been established for almost 20 years, but now from a human perspective, a major issue had to be settled.

Would the church proclaim a gospel of faith alone or would the church proclaim a gospel of faith plus works?

And this crossroads was a result of Jewish jealousy that we saw last week.

Jewish jealousy over the fact that Gentiles could now be saved without converting to Judaism first.

It was a jealousy rooted in spiritual pride that refused to celebrate God's grace.

It was a jealousy rooted in a desire to make other do what they had done.

And it was a jealousy that threatened the unity of the church.

Could Gentiles be saved without being circumcised?

Was heaven now open to people who hadn't grown up Jewish or even converted to the Jewish faith?

This was the question, and it was a critical cross-roads for the church.

So the apostles and elders gather in what is essentially the first church council in Jerusalem.

And we noted that such a council was necessary since very little of the NT had been written.

At that time, the apostles were the voice of truth, having been taught by Christ Himself.

So they gather to address the question of whether Gentiles must become Jews before they can become Christians.

Last week, we heard from Peter in verse 7-11, and his answer to the question was clear.

Look back at those verses.

***7 After there had been much debate, Peter stood up and said to them, "Brethren, you know that [d]in the early days God made a choice among you, that by my mouth the Gentiles would hear the***

*word of the gospel and believe. 8 And God, who knows the heart, testified 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.”*

Peter’s answer was simple.

God had used him to bring salvation to the Gentiles, and he confirmed their salvation by testifying that the Gentiles had been given the Holy Spirit apart from becoming a Jew.

The key phrase in Peter’s speech being the end of verse 9 where he says that God cleansed their heart by faith.

There was no cleansing of their hearts as a result of them being circumcised.

There was no forgiveness of sin based upon the Gentiles following the Jewish law.

Peter simply argues that God had saved Gentiles based solely upon their belief in Christ.

After Peter was finished speaking, Paul and Barnabas simply stood to affirm what Peter had said by relating their accounts of Gentile salvation in other parts of the world.

Remember, Paul and Barnabas had just returned from the first mission trip in church history.

They had traveled through multiple cities and preached in multiple places and saw multiple Gentiles along with some Jews saved.

And they too would affirm that Gentiles were being saved and given the Holy Spirit without becoming Jewish first.

Tonight, the third speech is given at this Jerusalem council and it is from James, the leader of the Jerusalem church.

It will run from verse 13-21, and then we will see the conclusion and the action taken by the council in 19-35...

But let's begin with James's Judgment in verse 13..

## I. James' Judgment (13-21)

*13 After they had stopped speaking, [e]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 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 [f]tabernacle of David which has fallen,*

*And I will rebuild its ruins,*

*And I will restore it,*

*17*

*So that the rest of [g]mankind may seek the Lord,  
And all the Gentiles [h]who are called by My name,'*

*18*

*Says the Lord, who [i]makes these things known from long ago.*

*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 [j]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 [k]he is read in the synagogues every Sabbath."*

There are a number of James in the Bible, but this James is unique in a couple ways.

For starters, this James is the half brother of Jesus.

He is also the author of the book of James, which is part of the NT.

And he is the leader of the church in Jerusalem, which is most important church in the NT.

So this speech by James would carry much weight with the council.

Yes, Peter has been the leader of the church in many ways at the beginning, but James would have the respect of everyone who came to listen to this council.

So he begins to speak in verse 13 by simply asking his brothers to listen to him.

And then in verse 14, he stand with Peter.

Simeon is simply Peter's Jewish name, and that would appeal to the Jewish Christians gathered there.

You see, they saw their identity as a people slipping away in the gospel.

In a sense, that is good.

There is neither Jew nor Gentile, slave nor free,  
male nor female in Christ.

But in another sense, that is difficult to see.

So even in an address where James will speak of  
Gentile inclusion in the church, he does not want  
the Jewish Christians in attendance to feel slighted.

Therefore, he calls Peter by his Hebrew name.

But he quickly gets to the point in verse 14 by  
agreeing with Peter that God was calling Gentiles to  
Himself.

And then to add much more weight than just the  
words of Peter, James turns to the OT in verses  
16-18 and quotes the prophet Amos.

Let me read this and then make a few comments.

**16**

***'After these things I will return,  
And I will rebuild the [f]tabernacle of David which  
has fallen,***

***And I will rebuild its ruins,***

***And I will restore it,***

**17**

***So that the rest of [g]mankind may seek the Lord,***

*And all the Gentiles [h]who are called by My name,'*

*18*

*Says the Lord, who [i]makes these things known from long ago.*

Now what is Amos talking about?

Amos was an OT prophet, and just like most of the OT prophets, he was sent to pronounce judgment on Israel.

However, just like most of the OT prophets, Amos ended his book with hope.

And what is the hope of Amos and the other prophets?

One day, Israel will be delivered from her enemies and restored to a place of prominence in the world.

Now, when is that?

Well, it surely hasn't happened yet, but it will and that time is still future to us.

As the present world winds down, there will be a rapture of the church, followed by 7 years of hell on earth.

We call that time period the tribulation period, and the purpose of those 7 years is to unleash wrath on unbelief but to also open Israel's eyes to Christ.

As the 7 years winds down, there will be a massive Jewish revival.

And God will have to supernaturally protect those believers by bringing the 7 year tribulation to an end with the 2nd coming of Christ.

And after Jesus crushes his enemies at Armageddon, he will set up his throne and restore the fortunes of the Jewish people.

Now Gentile believers like us will be a part of all of this as well.

We will live in that Millennial Kingdom as it is called and enjoy the blessings of Jesus as our King for 1000 years.

And this time of prosperity is what Amos is describing 1000s of years ago in his book.

King Jesus will return and establish his kingdom and even rebuild the temple of David in Israel.

That is what verse 16 is referring to.

And in that kingdom, all of the world's population will seek the Lord, even the Gentiles who are called by his name.

And why quote this?

By proving that God has predicted Gentile salvation in that future kingdom, James wants his listeners to know that Gentile salvation in the present day should not surprise anyone.

God saves Jews and Gentiles and both will be part of his eternal kingdom.

Now at this point in James speech, he really hasn't addressed the controversy of whether Gentiles must be circumcised and become Jews before salvation.

He simply wants everyone to know that Gentile salvation is predicted in the OT.

In other words, both Jews and Gentiles belong to the Lord's kingdom.

But now he must address the issue of Gentile salvation.

That begins in verse 19.

***19 Therefore it is my judgment that we do not trouble those who are turning to God from among the Gentiles,***

In this verse, James makes it clear that Gentiles are not to come under the law or practices of the Jews before being accepted into the church.

In other words, circumcision would only trouble Gentiles coming to Christ.

Every Jewish dietary law would trouble Gentiles coming to Christ.

Sabbath laws would only trouble Gentiles coming to Christ.

Now look, before I go any farther, let's be careful as a church to not add gospel hurdles to people today.

You don't have to have a perfect marriage to come to Christ.

You don't have to have perfect kids to come to Christ.

You don't have to have a well paying job to come to Christ.

You don't have to have a job at all to come to Christ.

You don't have to have a good name to come to Christ.

You don't have to have a church background to come to Christ.

Salvation begins and ends with faith alone in Christ alone.

There are no other requirements for salvation, and we need to be careful not to add our own Christian rules.

Kent Hughes puts it this way,...

***“We so easily push our preferences on others. We assume they will either do things our way or they are unspiritual. We too often put others through the paces of our own heritage before we fully accept them as brothers and sisters. Sadly, sometimes a church will radiate more of this than the gospel!”***

It is so easy to impose your convictions on everyone else, but we can't do that with the gospel.

The gospel is put your faith in Christ alone and He will save you.

May we add anything to that.

Now with that said, James is going to make a few more remarks..

Verse 20..

***20 but that we write to them that they abstain from [f]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 [k]he is read in the synagogues every Sabbath.”***

In verses 20 and 21, James moves from the doctrinal to the practical.

Gentiles are saved by faith alone.

They do not have to become Jewish before being accepted by God.

They do not to be circumcised before being accepted by God.

They do have to keep the Sabbath and various other Jewish law before being accepted by God.

But there are some things that they should do to be helpful to their bothers in the Lord who have a Jewish background.

And these things are spelled out specifically in verses 20-21.

3 have to do with food and one with sexual immorality.

Now it may seem obvious that Gentiles should not commit sexual sins, but understand that Gentiles did have a background of OT law.

Though some sexual sins are obviously wrong to everyone sin the law is written on every human heart, other sexual sins may not be so obvious.

So James simply tells the Gentiles to abstain from fornication, which is sexual activity outside of marriage.

That covers a pretty wide area of sexual sin, but that has always been God's design.

Sexual activity is limited to marriage period.

There are no exceptions.

One man, one woman for life.

But understand that Gentiles would not have that background.

Fornication was common among non Jews.

Polygamy, adultery, even marriages between relatives were the norm in the Gentile world.

So James simply tells the Gentiles to abstain from fornication.

Now clearly, the NT is going to repeat the sexual laws of the OT, but until those are written, James simply ask the Gentiles to abstain from sexual immorality.

And then there are the food restrictions.

Now these are also not a requirement for salvation, but it would be helpful for Gentiles to follow some Jewish guidelines for a while.

And these include not eating meat sacrificed to idols.

You see, Gentiles would kill animals and offer them to the gods and then sell the leftovers to be eaten.

Jews were so opposed to idol worship that they refused the meat that was left over from the idolatrous sacrifices.

Then there are the issues of strangled meat and blood.

Jews were very careful to follow OT dietary laws, and those law prohibited meat that still contained blood.

When you strangle an animal, it dies from lack of oxygen instead of lack of blood.

So strangled animals had blood in them, and Jews avoided blood at all costs.

Now why did God prohibit blood?

Well, the Jews diet set them apart from the nations around them, which ate blood.

But the Jews dietary laws also protected them from disease, and that was necessary to preserve Israel as a nation.

Therefore a Jew would never eat meat sacrificed to idols or strangled meat or bloody meat.

And even Jews that had come to Christ still had very sensitive consciences in this area.

Now God had told Peter that the dietary laws were abolished in the church, but a lifelong Jews still found it very hard to move away from those things.

So James wisely asked Gentiles to stay away from these practices.

Though it wasn't sinful for a Gentile to eat bloody meat or meat sacrificed to idols, it wasn't the most helpful to their brothers and sisters in the Lord who came from a Jewish background.

Here is how Paul puts it in 1 Cor 10.

***23 All things are lawful, but not all things are profitable. All things are lawful, but not all things edify. 24 Let no one seek his own good, but that of his [i]neighbor.***

In the Christian life, there are things that are lawful for you to do, but they may not be the most helpful to others.

There are things that aren't sinful to do, but they may harm the sensitive consciences of other believers.

You see, these Gentile Christians had no problem eating a rare steak, and there was no sin in doing that.

But here's the issue.

If they invited over some brothers in the Lord from a Jewish background, the sight of blood on the plate may have been hard for these former Jews to look at.

Now, to be fair, these Jews needed to grow in their faith and come to understand that all food was allowed and their dietary restrictions had ceased.

But until that maturity could occur, it was simply wise for the Gentile to abstain from those practices.

Let me give you a good principle that will serve you well in your Christian walk.

It may not be sin for you to do something, but if your actions or words cause lead someone to violate their conscience, it may be sin for them.

And you never want to be guilty of leading someone to violate their conscience.

Look, teach people truth, but give them time to grow and mature.

And as they grow and mature, stay away from things that cause them to sin against their conscience, even if their conscience is too sensitive.

So this is why James adds this to his speech to the council.

He wants to establish unity in the church and love for one another, and he wants to avoid spiritual pride issues.

Gentiles are saved apart from the law, apart from circumcision, but that does not mean that they should flaunt that grace and create more animosity with their brothers and sisters with a Jewish background.

Love should lead the way.

So that is the conclusion of this first church council.

And now it has to be communicated to the rest of the church.

So let's move from James' Judgment to the Elder's Encouragement.

## **II. Elder's Encouragement (22-35)**

Verse 22..

*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 [l]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.*

Now remember, the purpose of the council in Jerusalem was to settle a dispute that started in Antioch, when some Jewish teachers showed up at that church saying that Gentile believers had to be circumcised before they could be saved.

Since we now have a judgment by the apostles and elders in Jerusalem, it is necessary to head back to Antioch to announce the decision.

So Paul and Barnabas and Judas and Silas go back to report what the apostles have said in a letter.

And the opening of the letter is already good news because the apostles in Jerusalem are already calling there Gentile believers in Antioch their brothers.

And also notice that this letter was meant to be passed on to Cilicia as well, which means that it applies in every church.

The heart of the letter is seen in verses 24-29.

***24 “Since we have heard that some [m]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 [n]become of one mind, to select men to send to you with our beloved Barnabas and Paul, 26 men who have [o]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; [p]if you keep yourselves free from such things, you will do well. Farewell.”***

And the contents of the letter are essentially the words of those who spoke at the council.

Gentiles are saved without becoming Jewish first, but it would be wise for Gentiles to be sensitive to the weak consciences of their Jewish brothers.

So how will the church in Antioch respond?

Verse 30..

***30 So when they were sent away, they went down to Antioch; and having gathered the [q]congregation together, they delivered the letter. 31 When they had read it, they rejoiced because of its [r]encouragement.***

Needless to say, folks were pleased to hear the contents of the letter.

The Gentile believers were thrilled to learn that their salvation was genuine.

But even the Jewish believers were encouraged to see the council remember and try to honor their heritage.

It was truly a unifying moment for that church and for the church around the world going forward.

Jews and Gentiles could eat and fellowship as long as the meat was not sacrificed to idols and was well done.

Verse 32.

***32 Judas and Silas, also being prophets themselves, [s]encouraged and strengthened the brethren with a lengthy message.***

Judas and Silas were from the Jerusalem church and most likely had never been to Antioch, so they preached a lengthy message.

See, long preaching the biblical standard.

And then they returned home to Jerusalem or maybe Silas stayed behind.

***34 [[t]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.***

Verse 34 is not found in most manuscripts, so it likely doesn't belong here.

Most scholars believed it was added later to accommodate verse 40 which says that Silas to go on his second missionary journey with him.

However, Silas most likely went back to Jerusalem and then returned to Antioch to go with Paul on his second mission trip.

Whatever the case, Paul and Barnabas stayed in Antioch and continued to bless that church.

We will pick up in verse 36 next week.

## **Conclusion**

So what do we learn from the judgment in Jerusalem tonight?

### ***#1 - Let Scripture speak.***

Even though James made a case for Gentile inclusion in the church apart from the law, he quoted the book of Amos to support his argument.

It is so important to let the Bible address foundational issues in the church.

What is the gospel?

Who can be saved?

How are they saved?

These are all questions that must be derived from the plain teaching of Scripture.

It is fine for man to argue for truth, but the best arguments have a verse that coincides.

Know your Bible and let it speak for you.

**#2 - *Let freedom reign.***

In the words of James, do not trouble new believers with your personal preferences.

If Scripture doesn't command it, don't command others to do it.

If Scripture doesn't forbid it, don't forbid others from doing it.

The gospel is simple.

Don't complicate it with your personal convictions and don't add any burdens to it.

The Holy Spirit calls those to salvation, and He will convict of sin and clean up lives.

**#3 - *Let love lead.***

Though you have freedom in Christ, don't use that freedom to harm the conscience of someone who is just beginning to grow in their faith.

Your role in the life of your brothers and sisters is to encourage them and teach them.

But also to love them by staying away from activities that could harm their consciences to tempt them to old ways of life.

Look, if you know a new believer who was just saved out of a lifestyle of alcohol addiction, don't invite them over and offer them a beer or glass of wine.

You may have freedom and maturity to drink a glass but in your freedom, you harm their conscience and even tempt them with the sin of drunkenness.

Pride says I can do what I want to do and they need to understand that this is my house.

Love says I will not do anything to cause a believer to violate their conscience.

And my house was given me by the Lord to bring honor to him.

And there are plenty of other allowable things for you to do, but not all may be the most helpful.

So be wise and let love lead the way.

Let us pray.