

OUR *Guide* FOR USE IN *the Protestant Reformed Sunday School*

Lesson 71

Trouble on the Home Front

The Scripture Lesson *Acts 14:21 - 15:11*

After Paul was stoned in Lystra he and Barnabas went on to another town, the town of Derbe. Here again they preached the gospel, telling the people about God and about salvation in Jesus. And the Spirit worked in the hearts of the people so that many of them were turned to the Lord through the preaching.

The apostles stayed in Derbe for awhile, and then decided that it was time to go back to their home church. Instead of going straight back however, they took time to visit once more the new churches they had started in Lystra, Iconium, and Antioch. The members of each of these young churches had just recently been converted to Christianity. And already they were being persecuted. Paul and Barnabas therefore encouraged them to continue in their faith.

There was yet another way in which these young churches needed help. They needed *leaders*. They had no elders, no ministers. The apostles therefore helped them to appoint men of their own number who were spiritually strong to be their leaders.

After all of this, Paul and Barnabas at last left for home. They had been gone for well over a year, and, on their return, the church at Antioch of

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Syria was very glad to see them. The whole church came together, and the two missionaries told what great things God had done among the Gentiles through them.

But after the apostles were in Antioch for awhile, more trouble came. There were in Jerusalem some Jewish Christians who heard that churches were being started in Gentile lands. They heard, too, that when the Gentiles were added to the church they were not told that they must obey all of the laws of Moses. And these Jews did not like that. So they traveled to Antioch, and tried to teach the people there that one cannot be saved unless he is circumcised. This was very disturbing to the Christians in Antioch.

The church at Antioch therefore sent Paul and Barnabas and some other men to Jerusalem to talk to the leaders of the mother church about this problem. When they arrived, an important meeting was called. There were apostles present, as well as the elders of the church, and also many people of the congregation. And here too there were men who accused Paul and Barnabas of doing their missionary work all wrong. Missionaries, they said, should tell the Gentiles that they must be circumcised and must obey all of the laws of Moses.

Then Peter arose and told all of those present

there that that was simply not true. It *was* true that, in Old Testament times, the Jews had to obey the ceremonial laws. But it was *not* true that they were *saved* by obeying those laws. The laws were there to point the people to *Christ*. And now that Christ had come, all of those laws, even the laws about circumcision, were to fall away. God Himself, Peter said, made that clear many years before when He gave the Holy Spirit to Cornelius and his household without any regard to whether or not they were circumcised.

The accusers of Paul did not want that. They agreed that salvation is a gift of God, that it is by faith in Jesus. But they wanted also to keep some of the old laws, so that salvation could be partly the work of *man*. And that was very bad.

Peter told them that salvation was possible in only one way. We believe, he said, that “through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ we shall be saved.”

The Decision of the Jerusalem Council

Acts 15:12-32

Peter had argued at this important meeting in Jerusalem that both Jews and Gentiles are saved by grace alone, whether they are circumcised or not.

Paul and Barnabas then told about all the miracles that God had worked through them among the uncircumcised Gentiles. It was plain that *God* was receiving those Gentiles.

Then James, the president of this assembly, advised that they write to the church at Antioch and tell them that it was not necessary to lay the burden of the law on the Gentiles, but that the Gentiles should be asked to keep themselves from eating meat with blood in it, and from meat that had been offered to idols, and from fornication.

That is a bit hard to understand, but perhaps if we try we can learn something about what the church was going through at that time. Let us look first at the matter of eating blood.

The eating of blood was strictly forbidden by God Himself in the old Mosaic law. For hundreds of years therefore the Jews had been very careful to drain all of an animal’s blood before they ate

the meat. But now, at this meeting in Jerusalem, the church was coming to understand that all of those laws belonged to the Old Testament *only*, for they were meant to point to Christ, who had already come. But can you imagine what the Jews would think about eating blood all of a sudden? It would surely take awhile for them to get used to doing that. James therefore asked that the Gentiles, who lived alongside the Jews in the church, have respect for the feelings of the Jews and be careful about eating blood, though it was no longer forbidden by law. The only rule here is *love for the brother*.

Then how about the meat offered to idols? The problem here had to do with a practice of the heathen. The heathen people sacrificed animals to their idols, just as the Israelites did to Jehovah. After the sacrifice, the meat was still good for food. Sometimes that food was brought home and eaten at the dinner table. Sometimes it was brought to the market to be sold. The question was this: can a Christian eat of that meat?

It happened that later on this became a problem in the church at Corinth. When Paul wrote his epistle to the Corinthians, he told them that it certainly was true that an idol was nothing. Offering an animal to it therefore did not *change the meat*. So it was *not* wrong to eat it. However, Paul explained to the Corinthians that they must be very careful about doing so, because there were many people who would be *bothered* by it. Again, the rule here is *love for the brother*. As Paul said, “Let us follow after the things which make for peace.”

MEMORY WORK

Group A

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

Group B

Galatians 6:14a “But God forbid that I should glory, save in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

ACTIVITIES

This paper has been prepared in the hope that it will be used by students of all ages. The activities are designed so that the oldest will be challenged, and the youngest will find some of it within reach. Parents should encourage their children to attempt only what they can handle without frustration. For some that will be much, for others little.

DO YOU AGREE?

If you do, write Yes; if you do not, write No.

- ___ 1. Paul and Barnabas preached the gospel also in Derbe, but in that heathen city no one would listen to the Word.
- ___ 2. After Derbe, the missionaries decided to go back to Antioch of Syria.
- ___ 3. On the return trip, Paul and Barnabas visited again the churches they had established, and ordained elders in every one of them.
- ___ 4. In Antioch of Syria, Paul and Barnabas were disappointed that the church had so little interest in the work of the missionaries.
- ___ 5. Paul and Barnabas found too that the elders in the church in Antioch did not like it that the missionaries had started churches in other lands and did not require that the Gentiles be circumcised after the law of Moses.
- ___ 6. The church in Antioch therefore decided to send men to Jerusalem so that the matter could be settled there by the apostles and elders.
- ___ 7. In Jerusalem, Paul and Barnabas had to persuade Peter that circumcision was not necessary for salvation.
- ___ 8. Then James, who was the president of the assembly, declared that it was his judgment that the Gentiles should not be made to obey the ceremonial laws.
- ___ 9. James added, however, that he thought that it would be well to advise the Gentiles to abstain from eating blood.
- ___ 10. After approving the judgment of James in the matter, the assembly decided to send their decision to the church in Antioch through Paul and Barnabas.
- ___ 11. The members of the church in Antioch

were very pleased when the letter from Jerusalem was read to them.

QUESTIONS FOR YOUNGER READERS

1. What did Paul and Barnabas do on their way back to Antioch of Syria? Do you remember two ways in which the missionaries helped those young churches?
2. What good report were Paul and Barnabas able to give to the church in Antioch of Syria?
3. When members of the church in Jerusalem heard about the work of Paul and Barnabas, not all of them were happy. Why were some of them upset? What did they do about it?
4. What did the church in Antioch decide to do, in order to settle this important question?
5. The apostle who did most to settle the matter at the meeting in Jerusalem was Peter. How, according to Peter, had God already given His answer to the complaint of these men against the work of Paul and Barnabas?
6. Paul and Barnabas then told the assembly about some of the miracles that had been worked among the Gentiles. Do you understand how that helped to show that Peter was right and their accusers were wrong?
7. According to James, was it *wrong* for Gentiles to eat meat with blood in it? What did James have in mind when he said that the Gentiles should be advised not to do that?
8. James also would ask the Gentiles “to abstain from pollutions of idols.” Do you know what “pollutions of idols” were?
9. How did the assembly in Jerusalem let the church in Antioch know what they had decided?

COMPLETING SENTENCES

1. From Lystra, Paul and Barnabas went next to Derbe, where they also _____ the gospel and evidently made many disciples. At Derbe the missionaries turned back to Antioch of Syria in order to give the calling church an account of what the Lord had been pleased to do among the Gentiles through their labor. They decided to retrace some of their steps on the return trip, in order to strengthen the churches that they had founded in the cities of Lystra, _____, and _____ of Pisidia — first by exhorting the brethren to _____ in the faith even though God was pleased that they enter the kingdom through much _____, and secondly by ordaining _____ in every church, both for the teaching and for the government of the churches (Acts 14:21-23).

2. Coming to the region of Pamphylia the missionaries this time preached the Word in the city of _____, and then went down to the seaport, _____, and from there sailed to _____ of Syria. Here they _____ all that _____ had done with them, and how He had _____ the door of _____ unto the _____ (Acts 14:24-28).

3. Very likely Paul and Barnabas anticipated some opposition to the work done among the Gentiles. And that opposition came soon enough, for certain men came from _____ and taught that except the Gentiles be _____ after the manner of Moses they cannot be _____. These men professed to believe that Jesus died to save His people; but by insisting that circumcision was necessary for salvation they were in effect denying that Jesus is a *complete* Savior. And they apparently directed their criticism at Paul and Barnabas, who had established churches without requiring that the Gentiles be brought under the restrictions of the Old Testament ceremonial laws. After Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and _____ with these men from Judea, the church at Antioch decided to send a delega-

tion to _____ in order that the question might be settled by the apostles and _____ (Acts 15:1, 2).

4. From Galatians 2 we learn that one of the other delegates who accompanied Paul and Barnabas was a man by the name of _____, an uncircumcised Greek. Apparently the “false brethren” demanded that Titus be circumcised; but Paul writes that, to those men, he and Barnabas “gave place by _____, no, not for an _____” (Gal. 2:1-5). Titus therefore served in the delegation as a living example of the power of the gospel among the uncircumcised heathen.

5. Taking the land route from Antioch to Jerusalem, the delegation passed through Phoenicia and _____, stopping in the churches in those lands and declaring the _____ of the Gentiles. No questions were raised here about the law of Moses. We read only that the account of the Gentiles’ conversion caused great _____ unto all the _____ (Acts 15:3). Evidently it was only the Judean churches that had difficulty accepting the abolition of the ceremonial laws. For those churches in particular, therefore, the council that was about to be held in Jerusalem was of critical importance.

6. To the church in Jerusalem, and to the apostles and elders, Paul and Barnabas declared all things that _____ had done with them, letting the facts speak for themselves. However, not everyone was satisfied. For certain men who before their conversion had belonged to the sect of the _____ rose up and insisted that it was _____ to circumcise the Gentiles and to _____ them to keep the law of Moses. Because of the importance of the question, the apostles and elders came together, evidently in a second meeting, specifically to _____ this matter (Acts 15:4-6).

7. After there had been much _____, Peter rose up and reminded the brethren that the issue had really been settled some 10 years earlier in connection with the conversion of Cornelius the centurion. God, who knoweth the _____,

gave to Cornelius and his household the _____, even as He did to Jewish believers, putting no difference between Jew and uncircumcised Gentile, but purifying their hearts by _____. “Why tempt ye God,” Peter asked, “to put a _____ upon the neck of the disciples, which neither our _____ nor _____ were able to _____?” Obedience that could earn salvation, in other words, is possible for neither Gentiles nor Jew. The law, in fact, was never intended to serve that purpose. All the ceremonial laws were intended only as helps, to point to Christ. And when Christ came, the ceremonies of the law, which were only shadows of spiritual realities, must fall away. Not therefore through any *work*, Peter concludes, but only through the _____ of the Lord Jesus Christ shall _____ be saved, even as _____ (Acts 15:7-11).

8. So clear was Peter’s explanation of the purpose of God in the ceremonial laws, that when the apostle finished his address all the multitude kept _____. Paul and Barnabas then again related some of the _____ and wonders _____ had wrought among the _____ through them, thus putting His approval on the work of receiving the Gentiles into the church by faith alone (Acts 15:12).

9. Then James, as president of the assembly, brought the discussion to a conclusion. He demonstrated first of all that recent events _____ with the words of the prophets. God surely, James said, knows all His works from the _____ of the world; and this particular work of His He had been careful to foretell hundreds of years before it came to pass. Then James gave his _____, or judgment, of the matter, namely that they _____ not them which from among the _____ are turned unto God, by laying on them all the ceremonial requirements (Acts 15:13-19).

10. James knew, however, that it would not be easy for the Jews suddenly to put aside ceremonial laws that had been in force for hundreds of

years. Eating meat before it was completely drained of the blood of the animal, for example, had long been forbidden. Though it was understood now that that restriction belonged only to the shadows of the old dispensation, it would take time for the Jews to get used to the fact that it was no longer forbidden. James therefore advised that the council recommend to the Gentiles that, out of respect for the feelings of their Jewish brethren, they abstain from things _____ and from _____. Similarly, some Gentile Christians could well be offended if fellow Christians would eat meat that had been offered to heathen idols. Though eating that meat was not in itself sinful, James advised that the Gentiles abstain also from pollutions of _____ out of respect for the feelings of those whose conscience would bother them for it. And, finally, James knew that the Gentiles were living in heathen surroundings, where it was considered a normal, innocent thing to have sexual relations outside of marriage. James advised therefore that the Gentiles also be warned to abstain from _____ (Acts 15:20).

11. The advice of James must have been approved by the assembly, after which the assembly determined also to send _____ men of their own _____ to _____ with Paul and Barnabas to communicate officially the decision adopted by the Council of Jerusalem. They chose Judas and _____ for this task, and gave them a letter that stated the position of the church. In the letter they made clear that the Jews who had before troubled them, saying, “Ye must be _____, and keep the _____,” had received no such _____ from the apostles and elders in Jerusalem. The strong language in the letter (calling those Jews troublers of the church and subverters of souls) makes it clear that the council understood well that the “false brethren” had not simply misunderstood the ceremonial laws, but rather had tried to bring the whole church under the bondage of the law, by making salvation dependent on works. Confident that

their decision rested on the Word of God itself, the council added that it seemed good to the _____ and to _____ to lay upon the Gentiles no greater _____ than the necessary things that had been proposed by James (Acts 15:22-29).

12. When Judas and Silas came to Antioch they gathered the _____ together in order to read to them (to the whole congregation) the letter from Jerusalem. So different from the spirit of the “false brethren” was this letter, that the congregation in Antioch _____ for the consolation. And Judas and Silas, being _____ also themselves, _____ the brethren with many words and _____ them in the great truth of salvation by grace alone (Acts 15:30-32).

QUESTIONS TO THINK ABOUT

- One of the most important things that Paul and Barnabas did for the churches, on their return trip to Antioch of Syria, was to appoint elders in them. Can you explain why that was so important?
- When Paul and Barnabas returned to Antioch, according to Acts 14:27, “the church” was gathered together to hear their report. While that does not mean that every single member was present, it must mean that *most* members were present. How important is it, do you suppose, that the people in the churches that send missionaries have a real interest in their missionaries’ affairs?
- Read Acts 15:1. Why did men from Judea go to Antioch of Syria to make such a claim? If you read Galatians 2:16, can you tell why Paul considered this notion to be a threat to the very existence of the Christian church?
- The name “Judaizers” is given to those men in the church who taught that obedience to the ceremonial laws was necessary for salvation. Can you show that the error of the Judaizers is alive still today, though in a different form?
- Why did the church leaders in Antioch not decide the matter themselves, instead of sending a delegation to Jerusalem to have it settled there?
- How, according to Peter in Acts 15:7-9, did his own experience in the house of Cornelius the centurion shed light on the matter at hand in this council in Jerusalem? What is the yoke to which Peter refers in Acts 15:10? Do you understand what Peter is demonstrating when he declares that the Jews themselves had never been able to bear that yoke?
- After Peter’s decisive speech, Barnabas and Paul again declared “what miracles and wonders God had wrought among the Gentiles by them” (Acts 15:12). What, do you suppose, was their purpose in giving that information at that time?
- James recommended that the Gentiles be advised to abstain from things strangled and from blood (Acts 15:20), and he does that because, according to verse 21, there are synagogues in nearly every city in which Christian churches were or would soon be established. Do you see how verse 21 is the reason for abstaining from blood?
- Eating of meat offered to idols became a problem later in Corinth. Paul addressed it in I Corinthians 8. Can you show from verses 4-9 of that chapter that Paul agreed with James’ recommendation concerning “pollutions of idols” in Acts 15:20? According to I Corinthians 8:9, what was the reason for advising caution in doing what was in itself not wrong? Can you think of an example of how this rule of Paul applies to us also today?
- Fornication is a terrible sin. But so is murder, and so are many other transgressions of God’s law. Why would James then single out this particular sin (in Acts 15:20), as one against which the Gentiles should be warned? If James were writing to your class today, against what sin do you think he would warn?
- An important victory was won by the church at the Council of Jerusalem — a victory not only over the Judaizers but over Satan himself. What was Satan trying to accomplish through those “false brethren”? Can you think of a way in which the church actually *benefited* by this attempt of the devil?
- Read Acts 15:28. Read also John 16:3 and Acts 15:15 and tell how the assembly could be sure that what they had decided seemed good not only to themselves but also “to the Holy Ghost”?