

Acts

Acts 15:13-41 - Lifting burdens off, not loading more on

After listening to Peter, Paul and Barnabas explain how the Gentiles had responded so favourably and so quickly to the Christian message, it dawns on James, who was leading the discussion, that what Peter had just finished saying “described to us how God at first showed his concern **by taking from the Gentiles a people for himself,**” Acts 15:14.

This was a phenomenal conclusion by James, because he’s telling all the leadership in the church, apostles and elders, that this entire episode with the Gentiles - from its beginning in Peter’s experience with Cornelius in Acts 10 - meant God was now opening up salvation to **Gentiles** as well.

To a Jew at that point in time this was astounding news, because if it was true then they were actually experiencing the beginning of the next major chapter in God’s master plan to “bless ALL nations,” as God had promised Abraham 2,100 years earlier. It also meant that the prophecy in Isaiah 49:6 was now coming true as well, that Israel would be “a light to the Gentiles” so that “you (Israel) may bring my salvation to the ends of the earth.”

Unfortunately, Israel and the Jews had failed miserably in being that light to the Gentiles, and instead of bringing salvation to the Gentiles they’d become a sad little nation ruled by Gentiles. But suddenly, out of the blue, **Gentiles had been responding in huge numbers** to the “message of the gospel” (Acts 15:7). So what exactly was going on? Well, according to James, it was clear to him that God in **his love and concern** was throwing the doors wide open for Gentiles to experience salvation as well now.

And what made that so clear to James was a prophecy that popped into his head from **Amos 9:11-12**. Hadn’t God promised that one day he’d restore Israel to revive its purpose? Well, James then quotes Amos 9:11 as proof of it in **Acts 15:16**, starting with: “I (God) will return and rebuild David’s fallen tent. Its ruins I will rebuild, and I will restore it.”

So there it was in black and white: God had promised he would revive Israel so that, **verse 17**, “**other nations** will turn to me and be my chosen ones. God said it and now he’s doing it. It’s no afterthought; he’s always known he would do this” (Contemporary English Version and The Message combined).

God had never forgotten his promise that through Israel he would reach out to the Gentiles. But it was **through the church now** that he was doing it, not through the nation of Israel, just as Jesus had promised in Acts 1:8. The next great step in God's plan of salvation **extending to all humanity had begun**, therefore, and here it was happening before their very eyes.

And if they'd thought this was going to happen at some far off time in the future, they were wrong, because Peter, Paul and Barnabas had provided clear evidence from their travels that it was already happening. So, with all this in mind James wades in with a **"judgment"** in **verse 19**.

First of all, he says, **"we should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God."** And by that he meant what Peter was getting at, about not lumping Gentiles with their old Jewish customs (verse 10). That was James' first point. His second point in **verse 20** was, **"Instead we should write to the Gentiles, telling them to abstain from food polluted by idols, from sexual immorality, from the meat of strangled animals and from blood."**

James was focusing on four things that were very much part of the Gentile culture that these new Gentile Christians needed to stop doing. But why those four? Because, James explains in **verse 21**, **"the law of Moses has been preached in every city from the earliest times and is read in the synagogues on every Sabbath."**

Please recognize, James is saying, that for Jews, who'd been taught all their lives to obey the law of Moses, these four things were strictly taboo. To allow the Gentiles to continue doing them, therefore, would make it very hard for Jews and Gentiles in the church to get along.

But imagine how difficult that must have been for the Gentiles, having to give up things they held dear - that had been entrenched in their culture for centuries too. To ease the transition and prevent any upset between the Gentiles and the Jews, therefore, a letter was sent to **"the Gentile believers in Antioch, Syria and Cilicia"** (verse 23), which included the statement in **verse 28**, that **"It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us not to burden you with ANYTHING BEYOND"** those four requirements.

It was just those four and nothing else. **No other burdens** or **Jewish** customs, traditions or rituals would be put on them, which was already creating shock waves among the Jewish Christians (verse 5), but for this to work the Jews needed to give up things **they held dear** too (verse 10).

That's because they all needed to get the point, Jew and Gentile, that salvation was based purely on "the grace of our Lord Jesus" (verse 11), and not on anything else. And with that firmly established James finishes his judgment with the words, "You will do well to avoid these things," **verse 29**.

In other words, "You'll be **doing yourselves a huge favour** by avoiding these four things." It wasn't just to keep the peace between Gentiles and Jews, therefore, that this judgment for the Gentiles was made. It was also meant to free the Gentiles from practices that all their lives had been **harming them** physically, mentally, sexually and spiritually.

"Spiritually," for instance, they needed freeing from sacrificing to idols that ruled their lives with fear. The "message of the gospel" (verse 5) took care of that, because they were finding out for the first time in their lives there's a God "who knows the heart," **verse 8**, and on that basis alone, a good heart, he gets the message through to them that he's "accepted them," thanks to his Son. And then he proves it too by "giving the Holy Spirit to them" and the Spirit goes to work "purifying their hearts" (verse 9), so they could be healed from all the other empty junk ideas their culture had filled their heads and hearts with, like the need to drink blood to give themselves life.

Which makes all this so relevant to us Christians today, because God is **still** "showing his concern by taking from among the Gentiles a people for himself." He's still picking up people with good hearts and getting the good news message to them that he accepts them for their good hearts, and he's more than willing to prove it through the healing power of the Spirit, transforming them physically, mentally, socially, emotionally, sexually and from whatever other junk the culture has done a number on them with.

And it's through the church he's getting that message to them, which makes it absolutely incumbent on the church to not load those turning to God with any added laws, customs, traditions and rituals that make it seem like God requires those things as well. And whatever requirements that are made, like the ones required of the Gentiles in Acts 15:28-29, those requirements had **better be attached to FREEING people from burdens, not adding more**.

Which was exactly why the letter was circulated to all the churches in **Acts 15:30**. And in **verse 31** we get to see the response to it in the church at Antioch too. When the "people read it" they "**were greatly relieved and pleased**" (The Message). But it's not surprising they felt that way, because in their experience with Christianity so far it was powerfully clear it was about **lifting burdens, not adding to them**.

The Holy Spirit had been making it abundantly clear - and especially at this meeting of all the church leaders in Acts 15 - that no burdensome requirements would be added to or required beyond the simple belief that it's "through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved" (verse 11). And if there is anything we add to that, like they did in Acts 15, it was purely motivated by **freeing** people from burdens they'd been carrying, and never to burden them further.

And the entire leadership of the church wholeheartedly agreed with that judgment by James too. So, with all this in mind, **what would we put at the top of OUR list to not make it difficult for people turning to God today?**

Well, what we've seen in Acts 15 is **two categories of burdens** being lifted off the Gentiles - those they'd inherited from the culture, and those that some in the church wanted to load on them. And it's this second category that surely gives reason for us Christians today to question our denominational church traditions and rituals too, many of which have been made into requirements if you wish to remain a member of the church denomination you're in, and unfortunately also emphasize the differences between denominations that keep us Christians separated and judging each other. The pandemic **freed** us from many of those unattractive and unnecessary burdens, however, which hopefully has got us Christians doing some serious evaluation and thinking.

And in the first category - lifting burdens our culture has put on people, like the four mentioned in Acts 15:29 - well again, hopefully, we Christians come up trumps and "greatly relieve and please" people on that score too, when they realize Christianity may get a little tough on cultural obsessions like self-image, money and power, sexual and gender identity, and needing more and more stuff to make us happy, but it's not to take the joy out of people's lives, it's to do ourselves a great favour by dumping all that lot and trusting the Holy Spirit to power our lives instead. When Peter said, "Save yourselves from this corrupt generation" in Acts 2:42 it's because we have the power now to do that, and all **for our own good** too.

Christianity, as outlined in Acts 15, is about freeing us stressed out, hopeless feeling humans from burdens we put on ourselves, in both our cultures and our churches. So I nearly made the sub-title for these twenty-eight verses, "Free at last, free at last," but then in **verse 39** Paul and Barnabas "had such a sharp disagreement that they parted company" - and right after all that wonderful agreement among all the apostles and elders in the previous verses too.

It goes to show that we have a knack for making things difficult for ourselves and for others, even as mature Christians, which is more food for thought when analyzing our church traditions and rituals....