

Acts

Part 39 – “I Will Rebuild Its Ruins”

Acts 15:12-21

The church council called in Jerusalem provided a platform from which Paul, Barnabas, Peter, and James testified to God's faithfulness in calling Gentiles to himself. They bore witness to the fact that Gentiles were abandoning their paganism and turning to Christ without adopting the ceremonial regulations of the law. What is more, James, the brother of Jesus identified this Gentile migration to Christ as fulfilling God's promises to Israel through the prophets. Specifically, he preached from Amos concerning God's promise to rebuild the ruins of David's kingdom. Remarkably James names the bringing in of the Gentiles as the fulfillment of that very promise.

James therefore urged the council to accept the Gentiles even as God had in Christ. To become Christians we need not travel through customs or laws or cultural rites. To become Christians we need not plead our own merit. Indeed we must not plead our own merit. It is Christ and Christ alone who saves.

But as James reminds us in his words to the council, the same salvation by which the *penalty* of sin is cancelled is that by which the *power* of sin is broken. Christians who are saved entirely by grace through faith alone are also transformed by that same grace.

Main Idea: God is rebuilding his ruined people by gathering his elect from every nation, saving them by grace through faith, and calling them to holiness.

Exegetical Outline:

- I. The Jerusalem Council (15:1-33)
 - A. The Dispute in Antioch about the circumcision and the role of the Mosaic Law (15:1-3)
 - B. Reception of the Antioch delegation in Jerusalem (15:4-5)
 - C. Council of the Apostles and Elders (15:6-7a)
 - D. Peter's Speech (15:7b-12a)
 - E. Barnabas's and Paul's report (15:12b-f)**
 1. The report (15:12a-c)
 2. The authentication of the Gentile's faith (12:d-f)
 - F. James's speech (15:13-21)**
 1. Address (15:13)
 2. Argument from God's initiative: Circumcision is not necessary (15:14)
 3. Argument from Scripture (Amos 9:11-12; with Hosea 3:5; Jer 12:15-16; Isa 45:21) (15:15-18)
 4. Inference: Gentile believers do not have to convert to Judaism in order to be saved (15:19)
 5. Imperative: Christian liberty is not a license for sin (15:20)
 6. Rationale (15:21)

Notes on James' use of Amos:

- **v. 13** – It is not entirely clear why James the brother of the Lord would give the climactic speech at the Jerusalem Council. Perhaps it was the combination of his already great authority and the fact that he was not yet identified with the pro-Gentile party in the mind of the Jerusalem church. But, **take careful note**, James does not say that the Lord told him what the conclusion should be. He argues a case from the Scripture.
- **v. 18** – Vv. 16-18 pose a problem. A reading of Amos 9:11-12 in your Bible will show a different text in v. 12, which is Acts 15:17. James is citing Amos 9:12 from the LXX (the Septuagint – the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible composed about 200 years before Christ). However, there is good reason to believe that, in this case, it is the LXX that has preserved the original text better than the English translations. [The words "possess" and "seek" are, in Hebrew, differ in only one letter that is

often confused. The Hebrew letters *daleth* and *yodh* can look quite similar.] Also, the words for Edom and Man are the same, only the vowel points differ which were added only much later to the Hebrew text. It is likely that what James cites here from the LXX is, in fact, the best reading of the text of Amos. And so, what Amos is prophesying is in fact the ingathering of the Gentiles **as a means of restoring David's fallen tent!** That is, Gentiles -- as Gentiles, now making up the Israel of God.

- The original *Scofield Bible* declared that this text was "dispensationally the most important passage in the NT." The definitive theological principle of **dispensationalism** is the distinction between Israel and the church. The entire system depends upon this: that there are two separate and distinct peoples embraced in God's plan of salvation and that these peoples do not mix in salvation history. That requires **dispensationalism** to hold that the church is unrecognized in OT prophecy and that Israel always means ethnic Israel and cannot refer to a spiritual company of Jews and Gentiles together. So, for them, "I will return" cannot refer to the work of ingathering Gentiles into the previously all-Jewish Israel, but must refer to the second coming and to God's later work among Jews at the end of time (the millennium).
- This seems to miss the plain reading of the text. It also seems to undermine James' water-tight argument for Gentile admission into the church.
- So, Paul writing in Galatians 6 to a mixed congregation of Jewish and Gentile Christians: "Peace be on the Israel of God". To the mostly Gentile church in Philippi Paul wrote: "We are the circumcision." To the mostly Gentile church in Corinth Paul wrote: "Our forefathers passed through the Red Sea..." Israel is first and foremost a spiritual not a racial company.

God is rebuilding his ruined people...

1. By gathering his elect from among all the nations and people.

God does not have two different people with two different plans. God has always had one people.

a. The evidence from experience.

Vs. 12

Paul and Barnabas report from their missionary journey that God has been saving Gentiles entirely by grace through faith alone. They see this as entirely consistent with God's promises in the Scriptures.

b. The evidence from Scripture.

Vv. 13-18

James, the brothers of Jesus, preaches from the prophet Amos to prove from the Hebrew Scriptures that God had planned all along to graft Gentiles into the company of his people. So the church does not constitute a separate people with different promises. James' use of Amos is powerful in that he portrays God's promise to Israel concerning the Davidic kingdom to ingrafting of the Gentiles. In this we see that God's promises to Old Covenant Israel are being fulfilled in the church.

2. By breaking the power of sin over them.

Vv. 19-21

James repeats the call of Paul, Barnabas, and Peter to not place upon the Gentiles the burden of Jewish customs and ceremonial regulations. However he makes clear that all God's people, having been saved by grace, should show evidence of being transformed. He specifies four things which serve as categories of behavior associated with the Gentile's former paganism. In so doing, James makes clear that God not only frees his people from the penalty of sin, he breaks the power of sin which once held them captive. Transformation will follow liberation.