

Growing Pains

Acts 15:1-35

For those of you who have or have had teenagers in the house, you know that those can be some trying times.

- Moods change very quickly...
- They're impacted strongly by peers...
- Their body is changing and so they have to get used to that...
- There is an awkwardness in life that many times has no reason other than, "It's just that age!"

Well, by the time we get to chapter 15 of the book of Acts, we need to see that the Church is about 15-16 years old. And what we see here in the book of Acts is that as far as the Church goes,

- Her moods are changing very quickly...
- She is impacted strongly by peers...
- Her body is changing and so she has to get used to that...
- There is an awkwardness in life that many times has no reason other than, "It's just that age!"

Scholars place the events in Acts 15 at or about AD 49. With Jerusalem being the starting point of the birth and spread of the church, we read in the earlier pages of Acts that many – literally thousands of Jews and even some of the priests had come to a saving faith in Jesus Christ.

Acts 6

⁷ Then the word of God spread, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests were obedient to the faith.

Thousands of Jews and a great number of priests who were becoming followers of Jesus brought with them the **mindset and training of Judaism**. As I've shared with you before, the early Church looked very much like the synagogue and in many cases were still a part of the local synagogues. This became a major issue as Gentiles began coming to faith in Christ. They had never attended synagogue... they were never trained in the ways of Judaism and the Law of Moses.

The Church Body was changing and she was having a difficult time adjusting.

We looked at this several times in the chapters prior to chapter 15, but here it would seem as though the issue was going to come to a head and hopefully they finally would get everything settled for everyone, Jew and Gentile alike.

In the closing verses of chapter 14, we read that Paul, Barnabus and their missionary group had finalized their first Missionary Journey and had arrived back in Antioch of Syria, their sending Church. As a matter of fact, verses 27-28 tell us –

Acts 14

*²⁷ Now when they had come and gathered the church together, they reported all that God had done with them, and that He **had opened the door of faith to the Gentiles**. ²⁸ So they stayed there (in Antioch) a long time with the disciples.*

...but we don't know how long for certain that was. But we soon find that their peace and the ministry there in Antioch is going to get shaken up a bit as Jewish Believers from Jerusalem traveled to Antioch and started teaching.

Acts 15

*¹ And certain men came down from Judea and taught the brethren, "**Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.**" ² Therefore, when Paul and Barnabas had **no small dissension and dispute with them**, they determined that Paul and Barnabas and certain others of them should go up to Jerusalem, to the apostles and elders, about this question.*

We actually find down in verse 24 that these Jewish Believers came from Jerusalem without the consent, and without the blessing or commission from the Church leadership in Jerusalem. On their own, they felt they had a mission, and rather than submitting it to

the Holy Spirit and to the leadership of the Church, they set out **on their own**. And as they began teaching in Antioch, **they brought great stress upon the Church**.

These Jewish Believers, **a)** had probably been Believers for some time now, and **b)** yet were still connected strongly with their Judaic roots. Their teaching was making a negative impact on these relatively new Believers who had **come out of a pagan culture**.

What they were doing was saying that it took **more than just faith in Christ** and a **solid commitment of your life to His leading to be saved**. They said you needed to also **submit yourself to, and be in compliance with the Old Testament Law**.

These are what we know **as Judaizers** - Jews who seemingly accept the teachings of Jesus, but still hold on to the legalism of the Mosaic Law.

When Paul and Barnabus heard what was going on they **began debating with these Judaizers**. It became apparent to the leadership at the Church in Antioch that these men who were teaching **the necessity of the Law** wouldn't listen to **the message of grace**, or **the wisdom given to Paul by the Holy Spirit**. So the leadership of the Church determined that they needed to take the argument and debate up to Jerusalem and present it to the Apostles and the Elders of the Church. This is what has been called the Jerusalem Counsel, the first Church wide meeting, addressing doctrinal issues within the Church.

³ So, being sent on their way by the church, they passed through Phoenicia and Samaria, describing the conversion of the Gentiles; and they caused great joy to all the brethren.

These Gentiles and half-Gentile/half-Jew Believers in Jesus Christ, some who had been flat out pagans, knew that **the works and rituals of Judaism would not and could not add to their salvation** – that's why the news of other Gentiles coming to faith *caused great joy to all the brethren*.

⁴ And when they (Paul and company from Antioch) had come to Jerusalem, they were received by the Church and the Apostles and the Elders; and they reported all things that God had done with them.

As Paul and the others made contact with the Apostles and the Elders, they shared their story of the events of the First Missionary Journey. There is no doubt there was great rejoicing in the Church that day.

But Satan was still stirring up strife –

⁵ But some of the sect of the Pharisees who believed rose up, saying, "It is necessary to circumcise them, and to command them to keep the Law of Moses."

The **issue of circumcision** was bad enough, but they wanted these Gentiles to come under the same yoke of burden they remained in – they wanted to *command them to keep the whole Law of Moses*.

Later on Paul would have some very strong words to the Churches of Galatia in reference to trying to keep the Law and yet saying you stand in grace

Galatians 5

¹ Stand fast therefore in the liberty by which Christ has made us free, and do not be entangled again with a yoke of bondage. ² Indeed I, Paul, say to you that if you become circumcised, Christ will profit you nothing. ³ And I testify again to every man who becomes circumcised that he is a debtor to keep the whole Law. ⁴ You have become estranged from Christ, you who attempt to be justified by Law; you have fallen from grace.

This was a powerful issue and threatened the **very message and power of grace**. This needed to be settled once and for all, so the leadership in Jerusalem came together.

Acts 15

*⁶ Now the apostles and elders came together to consider this matter. ⁷ And when there had been much dispute, Peter rose up and said to them: "Men and brethren, you know that a good while ago God chose among us, that by my mouth the Gentiles should hear the word of the gospel and believe. ⁸ So God, who knows the heart, acknowledged them by giving them the Holy Spirit, just as He did to us, ⁹ and made no distinction between us (the Jews) and them (the Gentiles), **purifying their hearts by faith**.*

*¹⁰ Now therefore, why do you **test God** by putting a yoke on the neck of the disciples which **neither our fathers nor we were able to bear**? ¹¹ But we believe that through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ we shall be saved in the same manner as they."*

Peter reminded them of the work of God in the area of Samaria and with the household of Cornelius. God had moved powerfully in the lives of these Gentiles as they surrendered their lives by faith to the grace of God offered through the sacrifice of Christ – **not in the keeping of the Law.**

Every Jewish Believer that was present that day (even the Judaizers) **knew that the keeping of the whole Law was an exercise in futility and frustration**, bringing on a continual guilt trip, as well as a probable pulling away from fellowship with God when you come to realize your own inability to maintain such a strict standard. Peter asked a very straight forward and candid question to the assembled group: *why do you test God by putting a yoke on the neck of the disciples which **neither our fathers nor we were able to bear?***

Peter is telling them, *“You and I were raised under these Laws and we can’t keep them, so why are you going to burden down those who were never raised with the Law? You are testing the grace of God and His work with the Gentiles who have come by faith to receive Him!”*

Then Peter reminds this crowd of Jewish Believers that it **was and still is only through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ (that) we shall be saved in the same manner as they**. Even as Jews, they didn’t have an advantage or **“step-up”** on the Gentiles. **The Jews needed to be saved by grace through faith in Jesus Christ in the same way as the Gentiles.**

As Peter finished the multitude was understandably silent.

This then gave Barnabas and Paul an opportunity...

*¹² Then all the multitude kept silent and listened to Barnabas and Paul declaring how many miracles and wonders **God had worked through them among the Gentiles.***

As they gave testimony of the miracles of God, it was evident proof of the move of the Holy Spirit in the lives of these Gentiles who had come to faith in Christ. And, once again the multitude fell silent.

Personally, I think there was **a whole lot of ponderin' and prayin' going on that day.** Things were changing in the life of the Church and they were (at least for a moment) at a standstill as to how they should move.

When a young teenager begins to grow, sometimes their bodies grow faster than their coordination. Many times they **look awkward** and what they **used to be able to do easily now becomes a major effort.** The Body of Christ was growing fast and although many were willing to accept the change, there were also **many who didn't want or accept the change.**

When Paul and Barnabus finished, once again the crowd became silent, and **now James, the half-brother of Jesus** issues the final judgment on the matter...

*¹³ And after they had become silent, **James answered**, saying, "Men and brethren, listen to me: ¹⁴ Simon has declared how God at the first visited the Gentiles to take out of them a people for His name. ¹⁵ And with this the words of the prophets agree, just as it is written:*

*¹⁶ 'After this I will return and will rebuild the tabernacle of David, which has fallen down; I will rebuild its ruins, and I will set it up; ¹⁷ So that the rest of mankind may seek the LORD, **even all the Gentiles who are called by My name**, says the LORD who does all these things.'*

*(Then James continued) ¹⁸ "Known to God from eternity are all His works. ¹⁹ Therefore **I judge** that we should not trouble those from among the Gentiles who are turning to God, ²⁰ but that we write to them **to abstain from things polluted by idols, from sexual immorality, from things strangled, and from blood.** ²¹ For Moses has had throughout many generations those who preach him in every city, being read in the synagogues every Sabbath."*

We find that this statement pleased the whole Church.

It is very interesting that out of his four suggestions, included in the four is the admonition for the Gentiles to be in obedience to four of the Old Testament commands.

The first two, although a part of the Old Testament laws found in Leviticus are logical and reasonable: *do not be partakers in anything dealing with idolatry and secondly,*

abstain from any and all sexual sin. These aren't issues particular only to the Gentiles or even the Jews, but they are issues that will cause anyone to become ineffective in their Christian life and a continuation of falling away from obedience to Christ.

The Gentile world was pagan by and large. Some of them had left their pagan roots as they sought after the God of Israel, but idol worship was still a major portion of the culture.

In a very simple sense, idolatry is anything that can or does come between our full commitment to Jesus Christ. Idolatry can take many forms:

- Men or man-made images or representations worshiped as deities – that was definitely a part of the Roman culture;
- Any natural or manufactured objects which become the major focus of our lives, commanding our attention and devotion;
- Even nature or creation itself, or anything receiving worship other than the one true God.

The Apostle Paul warned us in the book of Romans how easily man turns to idolatry, worshiping the creation rather than the Creator:

Romans 1

²² Professing to be wise, they became fools, ²³ and changed the glory of the incorruptible God into an image made like corruptible man--and birds and four-footed animals and creeping things.

²⁴ Therefore God also gave them up to uncleanness, in the lusts of their hearts, to dishonor their bodies among themselves, ²⁵ who exchanged the truth of God for the lie, and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever. Amen.

It doesn't have to be some small little statue of some pagan god or superstitious ritual. Our jobs or wealth can become an idol; our search for fame and recognition can become an idol; even our love and attraction for another, if it comes in between your commitment to Christ, then he or she has become an idol in your life.

Likewise, the lifestyle and culture of the pagan world saw a **tremendous amount of on-going and open sexual immorality.** For the Gentile convert to purposefully restrain

from anything having to do with idols would be a life changer. As well as purposefully restrain from sexual immorality. It had most likely been an active part of their life pre-Christ. As a matter of fact much of the **pagan worship** they had been involved with actually included acts of sexual immorality. The Greeks had literally worshiped the concept of the human body and sexual immorality saturated their culture. As the Romans adapted much of the Greek culture, sexual immorality became the norm rather than the exclusion.

Later Paul would write in many of his letters the danger of sexual immorality of any kind. He wrote to the Corinthian Church, Corinth being a major center of both pagan worship and open sexual immorality –

1 Corinthians 6

¹⁸ Flee sexual immorality. Every sin that a man does is outside the body, but he who commits sexual immorality sins against his own body. ¹⁹ Or do you not know that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God, and you are not your own? ²⁰ For you were bought at a price; therefore glorify God in your body and in your spirit, which are God's.

That message of James to the Gentile Church of the First Century, as well as the same messages of Paul, James, Peter, and John in their letters to the Churches are just as important and needful today in our culture.

Stay away from anything which comes between you and your complete and faithful worship of the One True God and flee sexual immorality. So, as I said, the first two commands are logical and reasonable. But what about this next two: abstain eating *from things strangled, and from blood*. Wouldn't they be considered more of a cultural choice?

To help us understand that, I draw from Albert T. Barnes:

And from things strangled... That is, from animals or birds that were killed without shedding their blood. The reason why these were considered by the Jews unlawful to be eaten was, that thus they would be under a necessity of eating blood, which was positively forbidden by the law. They were not killed in the normal way and then drained of the blood... that leads to the fourth and final directive –

Abstain eating or drinking blood... The forbidding of eating of blood actually came from the Lord long before the time of Moses and the Law. Just as Noah and his sons were beginning a new life after the flood the Lord told Noah –

Genesis 9

⁴ *"But you shall not eat flesh with its life, that is, its blood. ⁵ Surely for your lifeblood I will demand a reckoning; from the hand of every beast I will require it, and from the hand of every man's brother I will require the life of man.*

There is also the fact that the use of blood was common among the Gentiles. They **drank it often at their sacrifices**, and in making covenants together or to their plethora of gods. But, because it was so often used in the feasts of pagans and idolaters was **only one reason for the prohibition**.

In a spiritual sense there is a **higher reason**: God clearly pointed out the fact that the life is in the blood (Gen. 9:4 and Lev. 17:11); it was a clear understanding that without the shedding of blood, there was no sacrifice for sin (Heb. 9:22). And we know too that Jesus Himself, shed His precious, life sustaining blood, in order that we who were dead in our sin could receive life from Him. His blood became the sacrifice for our sin. Even from the Garden, blood had to be shed because of the sin of man. The blood has a special place in the message of salvation.

Acts 15

²² *Then it pleased the apostles and elders, with the whole church, to send chosen men of their own company to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas, namely, Judas who was also named Barsabas, and Silas, leading men among the brethren. ²³ They wrote this letter by them:*

*The Apostles, the Elders, and the Brethren,
To the brethren who are of the Gentiles in Antioch, Syria, and Cilicia:
Greetings.*

²⁴ *Since we have heard that some who went out from us have troubled you with words, unsettling your souls, saying, "You must be circumcised and keep the law" --to whom we gave no such **commandment**—²⁵ it seemed good to us, being assembled with one*

accord, to send chosen men to you with our beloved Paul, ²⁶ men who have risked their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. ²⁷ We have therefore chosen Judas and Silas, who 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 necessary things:

-
- *from blood,*
- *from things strangled,*
- *and from sexual immorality.*

If you keep yourselves from these, you will do well. Farewell.

³⁰ So when they were sent off, they came to Antioch; and when they had gathered the multitude together, they delivered the letter. ³¹ When they had read it, they rejoiced over its encouragement.

³² Now Judas and Silas, themselves being prophets also, exhorted and strengthened the brethren with many words. ³³ And after they had stayed there for a time, they were sent back with greetings from the brethren to the apostles.

³⁴ However, it seemed good to Silas to remain there. ³⁵ Paul and Barnabas also remained in Antioch, teaching and preaching the word of the Lord, with many others also.