

Chronological Week 48

November 23: Acts 15 and 16

Some new converts believed that all men must go through the circumcision process to be a true Christian. It was a covenantal sign between Abraham and God, since these people were now being added to the list of God's people, it would make sense from a worldly standpoint that they would need to. However, Paul and Barnabas are quick to point out that these men do not have to be circumcised in order to be true believers. The point is further contested which leads to an assembly of the Jerusalem council. Paul and Barnabas argue that placing this requirement on Gentile believers would only serve as a stumbling block. Rather than be concerned about circumcision, they believe the people should be encouraged to abstain from things polluted by an idol, eating any animal that had been strangled, and from blood. This instruction is sent by letter. When the recipients read the letter, there was rejoicing because of its encouragement.

Though Paul and Barnabas had been quite the dynamic duo, something happens between the two. We do not know exactly what the disagreement was, but it was enough that the two decided to part ways. It was better for them to separate and continue preaching the message than to bicker with each other. Barnabas is not mentioned in Acts after this incident.

Paul travels on to Derbe and Lystra where he meets Timothy. Timothy was the son of a believing Jewish woman, but his father was Greek. It is interesting to note that Paul takes Timothy and circumcises him before they can go and preach the Gospel. This seems odd for two reasons. Timothy was technically fully Jewish because his mother was Jewish. He should have been circumcised on the eighth day after his birth. Presumably, his father would not allow it. It also seems odd that Timothy would need to be circumcised since the chapter prior to this deals with refuting the idea that true believers had to be circumcised to be fully in the law. So, I am sure you are asking, why did Paul circumcise him then? I am glad you asked. Paul had him go through it so that they would not offend any of the Jewish people they encountered. If Timothy had not been given this physical mark of the covenant God established with Abraham; he would have driven potential believers because he would be viewed as claiming something that he is not.

They travel on and through a series of events make their way to Macedonia. Timothy and Paul wind up in Philippi, "a leading city of that district of Macedonia (Acts 16:12). There were not many Jews in Philippi, so the few Jews would gather at the river by the city gate for prayer on the Sabbath. That is where Paul meets Lydia. The LORD opens her heart and she and her entire family are baptized into the faith. It is disgusting that these men cared more about making money than they did the welfare of the girl.

Paul and Silas wind up in prison for healing a young girl with a demon. The demon allowed her to tell the future, so her owners made a great profit off her. When her owners see that their livelihood has been taken away, they seize Paul and Silas and take them to the chief magistrates. The two are beaten and put in prison. At midnight, they were praying, and a violent earthquake hit the prison. The doors were opened, and the chains came loose. When the guard saw this, he was ready to kill himself. This might seem extreme to us, but in those days if the prisoners had

escaped, he would have either been tortured to death or forced to complete the prisoners' sentences.

Paul cries out to the guard not to harm himself. He explains that they are all still there. The guard then asks what he must do to be saved. The guard took them to his house where every one of his family was baptized.

November 24: Galatians 1-3

Galatians was one of Paul's earliest letters. This letter gives a strong presentation of the truth that sinners are saved by trusting in Jesus alone. Further, that belief in Jesus will also drive them to live godly lives. Paul opens his letter with a nice greeting that abruptly shifts in tone. He is amazed that they are defecting from the gospel of grace. Rejecting this true gospel is the same as rejecting God Himself. They have turned to another gospel, one that they think is superior. However, since it is not from God, it is no gospel at all.

Paul speaks of an issue of hypocrisy. There was debate in the early church on whether a converted Gentile had to be circumcised or not. The debate was so fierce a council had to be formed to settle the debate. Despite the ruling that Gentile converts did not need to go through circumcision, there were Jewish converts that were adamant that all Christians be circumcised. Peter (referred to as Cephas) regularly ate with Gentiles. However, when the circumcision party arrived, Peter quickly stopped associating with the Gentiles, trying to appease the circumcision party. I learned long ago that try as we might, we will never please everyone. Furthermore, if we try to please everyone, then we wind up making everyone mad. Peter should have continued associating with the Gentiles regardless of who else was in his company.

Paul asks if the Galatians are foolish. He asks if they received the Spirit by the works of the law or hearing with faith. It is their faith that gives them righteousness, not their works. He reminds them that Abraham believed God and it was credited to him as righteousness. God called Abraham before Abraham believed, not after. God called us to Him before we believed.

We might think that there is no need for the law based on our salvation through faith. The law is not contrary to the faith. The law was given so that we have an established rule on how we are supposed to interact with God and our fellow man. The Ten Commandments were given to Moses and we would think they are easy to follow since there are just ten. However, these rules proved impossible for us to follow. The law is not abolished by Christ. Instead, He fulfills the law. When we come to know Him, we are part of His family. Therefore, there is no Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female. Instead, we are all united in Christ.

November 25: Galatians 4-6

Paul expresses concern for the Galatians. At one point, they did not know God and were enslaved to these false gods. Now they know the truth. They know the One true God and they are known by God. He asks how they can turn back to the things that used to enslave them after knowing Him. That question can also be asked of us. Do we follow God because we want to be forgiven, live for Him, and become more like Him? Or do we profess belief with the expectation

of forgiveness, but no change in our behavior? We should not turn God's abundant grace into the abuse of grace. It comes down to this question: What do we love more, Jesus or our sin? Some of these folk in Galatia were trying to have it both ways. They wanted to live a sinful life, maintaining their fleshly lifestyle, only using Jesus as fire insurance.

Since Christ has freed us, we should not return to the slavery of sin. Our freedom should not be used as an opportunity for the flesh, but to serve one another in love. The entire law can be fulfilled in one command: Love your neighbor as yourself. We are also called to bear one another's burdens. I would also like to add that we should bear one another's celebrations as well. Throughout my life, I have found it is easier for some to commiserate with someone going through a tough time than it is to rejoice with someone that has been given great news. We should bear one another's burdens and joys. We are all family.

November 26: Acts 17

After Paul and Silas are released from prison, they travel to Thessalonica where there was a Jewish synagogue. They told the people in the synagogue about Jesus. Some came to belief, others did not. Those that did not believe became jealous and caused a riot to break out. They want to murder Paul and Silas, so they run to Berea. The Bereans were a lot more open minded than the people of Thessalonica. They search the Old Testament and find that what Paul is telling them is true. However, this ministry is cut short because the rioters from Thessalonica travel to Berea with the intent to kill Paul. Paul leaves, but Silas and Timothy remain there.

Paul makes it to Athens where he sees the various altars erected for the various gods they worshiped. Paul addresses the crowd, noting that he found the altar made for "the unknown god". Paul explains that this is the One True God. They have been worshiping Him in ignorance, but now Paul proclaims the truth of God Almighty to them.

November 27: 1 Thessalonians and 2 Thessalonians

Even though Paul was not in Thessalonica long, he was able to establish a church there. Since there was not much time to give all the instruction the new converts needed, he sent letters to give further guidance. Paul opens the letter by giving thanks. The converts there immediately turned away from idols and began serving the One true God. Paul reminds them that in Philippi, he had great opposition to presenting God's message, but he was still emboldened to spread the Gospel. Not everyone will accept God's message. That is one reason Paul is so happy with this group in Thessalonica, they heard and accepted the message. Paul has been trying to make it back to visit them, but he has been hindered every time.

Since he could not make it, Paul sent Timothy. After Timothy spends some time there, strengthening and encouraging them. Timothy comes back to Paul with great reports of their faith and love in Thessalonica. Paul encourages them to do better at walking with the LORD, even though he admits that they are already walking and pleasing God.

Based on Paul's response in chapter 5, we can assume that someone had a question about when the Day of the LORD would come. He reminds them that they know it will come like a thief in

the night. Even Jesus would not tell the disciples when He was coming back, explaining that was for the Father in Heaven to know. Since we do not know when He is returning, we should live as if He could show up at any moment.

Paul closes the letter telling them to rejoice always and pray constantly. They should give thanks in everything and stay away from every kind of evil. As believers, are we doing these things?

The second letter to the church in Thessalonica was written to give further clarification on how to live the Christian life. Paul encourages them, explaining that they will be counted worthy of God's kingdom. He then launches into their concern about the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. He asks them not to be easily upset and not to be deceived. There have been people throughout history that have boldly proclaimed the exact date that Jesus was coming back. They have been wrong. Paul points to a future time when apostasy happens and the man of lawlessness is revealed. This makes me think that the end will come when the Gospel is no longer being preached. They have no need to worry about when it will happen, neither do we. Instead, we can stand firm in the faith and hold to the traditions we were taught.

Paul closes the letter encouraging them to keep away from irresponsible people. They should not be lazy. Paul was not lazy while he was with them, neither should any of them be lazy. This is not to say that people in need should not be helped, but there is a difference between laziness and need. Proverbs 19:24 "The slacker buries his hand in the bowl; he doesn't even bring it back to his mouth." That is the kind of laziness Paul is warning about here. He also encourages them to not grow tired in doing good.

November 28: Acts 18 and 19

Paul leaves Athens and arrives in Corinth. He meets up with Pontus, a tentmaker, and resides with him and his wife since they were tentmakers by trade. Paul went to the synagogue every Sabbath to try to reason with them there and continually tried to persuade the Jews and the Greeks to come to Christ. Silas and Timothy arrive from Macedonia while Paul is preaching in the synagogue. He is having no luck, so he shakes the dust off of his sandals and tells them that their blood is on their hands, not his since he has delivered God's message. He goes next door to Crispus's house and has great success in bringing people to Jesus. God commands Paul in a night vision to continue speaking and not be silent. Paul remains in Corinth for a year and a half before he is finally driven out by threat of execution.

Paul leaves and travels through familiar territory to encourage the brothers and sisters. He meets a Jew named Apollos, who is very eloquent and powerful in speech. He had been instructed in the way of the LORD and he spoke and taught about Jesus accurately. However, he had only been through John's baptism. He had not received the Holy Spirit. Apollos is brought to the home of Priscilla and Aquilla where he is taught more accurately about the ways of Jesus.

While Paul is in Ephesus, he encounters some of John's disciples. He asks if they had received the Holy Spirit when they believed. They admit they had not, so they are baptized in Jesus's name and they receive the Holy Spirit. Paul continues to lecture about the Way for three months. While he is there, he gains some notoriety as a healer. The miracles Paul was doing were so

extraordinary that people were being healed just by touching clothes that Paul had worn. Paul heals a man of demonic possession. Many come to know Jesus as LORD and Savior. They burn their magic books publicly and confess their sin.

This is terrible news for the people that make pagan shrines. Demetrius, realizing how much profit he and the other idol makers were going to lose on the Way, assembles the craftsmen. He stokes up fear, stating that they will lose their prosperity, since it comes from idolatry. Now people are believing that gods made by human hands are not gods and their businesses will be discredited. The crowd is enraged and start a riot. The city clerk calms the crowd down, stating that Demetrius and the other craftsmen must bring a formal case against Paul.

November 29: 1 Corinthians 1-4

Paul spent no less than 18 months in Corinth establishing the church. As he continued his travels, he received letters from some members asking questions and also describing some of the issues the church faced at the time. We can break 1 Corinthians into two sections. The first section is Paul correcting poor behavior. The second half of the letter is him answering questions about the Christian life.

The letter begins with Paul giving thanks for the believers in Corinth. This is a common opener for Paul. From there, he begins admonishing them for the division in the church. Some of the believers are separating themselves from the others based on who they follow. They align with a mortal man instead of the One they were baptized in the name of. As Christians, our alliance should first and foremost be with Jesus. He also reminds them that they have no reason to boast in their salvation. They are not the ones that did the work of salvation. If they are going to brag, then it should be in the LORD and the work He has done.

Paul reminds them that he did not come to them with eloquent speech or gimmicks to get them to believe in Jesus. Instead, he presented the raw truth to them about the LORD. The faith of a Christian is not based on worldly wisdom. Instead, it is based on the wisdom of the LORD, which the world sees as foolish.

Despite the fact that the church has been around for a while, there is still a problem with some of the members not maturing in their faith. Paul says that he only feeds them with spiritual milk because they are not ready for anything else. When we come to have belief in Jesus, we should grow in our faith and our abilities to follow His word and do His will should become easier. If we continue in the same worldly state without growing more like Christ, have we really had a conversion experience?

The believers in Corinth are viewed as Paul's own children and so he is giving them fatherly care. Some of the believers are beginning to doubt that Paul is coming back to visit them. They puff themselves up with pride, thinking they know better and can get away with things since Paul has not come back to them yet. When he comes back to them, it will either be with a rod or with gentleness. Their behavior will be the deciding factor on how he will handle them.

November 30: 1 Corinthians 5-8

There is a scandalous case of sexual immorality happening in the church. A son has taken his father's wife as his own. Most likely this guy's father and stepmother are not part of the church. So he is harming their view of the church and what appropriate behavior is. However, that is not the only problem. The other problem is that none of the church leaders have rebuked this man for what he is doing which is just as scandalous as the man's behavior. Rather than admonish this man and take him through the process of church discipline, they brag about what is going on, showing how tolerant they are of this sin. Someone should mentor this man and have him make things right between his father and stepmother.

Just as we live in a world of litigation, the believers back then had frivolous lawsuits among themselves. Paul warns them about this since they are taking matters that could be handled at the lowest level and they are instead airing out the church's dirty laundry. When these things happen, people on the outside of the church take notice. If we are not offering anything different than the rest of the world, why would they think that the church is any different than any other club? They are letting small matters that should be shaken off affect not just members of the church, but the outsiders that are looking in. They are all encouraged to run from sexual immorality. It will get them into serious trouble!

Paul shifts from his admonishments to questions about holy living. He had received correspondence from married people saying that they should abstain from touching their wives. Paul explains that sex was designed for marriage and it should be between a husband and wife. God does not expect married people to abstain from each other. So, we have some people in the church that have so little care about breaking God's commands that they are engaged in sexual immorality. Then there is another group that wants to make sure they don't violate God's command and have decided not to touch a woman, even his wife.

There is encouragement for new believers to be happy where they are at. When we come to know Jesus, our life situation will not necessarily change. When I came to have faith, it was not all sunshine and rainbows. Still some days today are not the greatest. But I have learned to be happy wherever God has placed me and in whatever situation He has me in.

There is an issue of food being offered to idols. Some people think it is sinful to eat meat that was offered to an idol first. Others are okay with it. I am in the camp that thinks it is not bad. After all, it is not as if that idol is an actual god. So there is no real harm in eating the meat offered to idols. However, it is harmful if it causes another believer to stumble in their walk. As believers, we are not just connected to Christ, but we are connected to one another. The things we influence the other believers in our lives. We must be careful not to be a stumbling block to anyone.