**Paul’s Message is Officially Reviewed**

(Acts 15:1-11)

By Pastor Ricky Kurth

A man went to court to get a divorce one day, and the judge told him: “I’ve reviewed your case very carefully, and I’ve decided to give your wife $800 a week. The man replied, “That sounds fair enough, Your Honor. And every now and then, I’ll try to send her a couple of bucks myself.”

Speaking of *reviewing* things, here in Acts 15 the message of the Apostle Paul is going to be *officially* reviewed by the saved Jews in the Jewish kingdom church in Jerusalem—the one the Lord started when He was here, and the one He put the 12 in charge of before He left. Acts 15 is the story of how that review went down, and it begins in Verse 1:

**“And certain men which came down from Judaea taught the brethren, and said, Except ye be circumcised after the manner of Moses, ye cannot be saved.”**

Now just so you know what’s going on here, by this time in the Book of Acts, Paul has been out preaching to Gentiles for about 13 years, telling them that they could be saved *without* circumcision. And as you can see, that got the attention of some men who attended the Jewish church in Jerusalem. They came down from Jerusalem to Antioch where Paul’s new *Gentile* church was located, and told those Gentiles that they *did* have to be circumcised to be saved.

And it’s not hard to figure out why they did that. It was because they knew that that’s what the law of Moses said. What they *didn’t* know is that God had made a dispensational change from law to grace with Paul’s ministry. So those men might have meant well in standing for the only truth they knew, but when they started making Paul’s new converts think they weren’t saved because they weren’t circumcised, they were walking on the fightin’ side of Paul, as we see in verse 2 of our text:

**“When therefore Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and disputation with them, they determined that Paul and Barnabas, and certain other of them, should go up to Jerusalem unto the apostles and elders about this question” (Acts 15:2).**

After Paul contended with those men from Judaea, they decided to send him and Barnabas to Jerusalem to let the Jewish church there settle this issue. As we’ll see in a moment, Paul agreed to go.

So here we have to ask why Paul would let those men send him to ask the 12 apostles about his message if the Lord Himself *gave* Paul his message. I mean, why didn’t he just tell those men, “Nuts to you guys. The Lord Himself told me to preach grace to Gentiles, so you guys can take a hike and go fly a kite!”

The answer to that question is that Paul didn’t go to Jerusalem because *those men* told him to go. He went because *the Lord* told him to go. I know it doesn’t say that here in Acts 15, but take a look at what Paul later told the Galatians about what was happening here:

**“I went up…to Jerusalem…*by revelation…”* (Galatians 2:1,2).**

Now that word “revelation” is the noun form of the verb *to reveal.* That means Paul went to Jerusalem because the Lord *revealed* to him that he should go. And Paul went on to tell the Galatians *why* the Lord wanted him to go:

**“I went up by revelation, *and communicated unto them that gospel which I preach among the Gentiles”* (Galatians 2:2).**

God sent Paul to Jerusalem to tell the Jewish kingdom church about the new message of grace he’d been out preaching to the Gentiles, so they could review it and decide if they wanted to give it their stamp of approval.

You say, “But why would he *need* their stamp of approval if *the Lord* sent him to preach grace? Well, what you’re seeing there is the *respect* the Lord had for the Jewish church that He’d established when He was here on earth ministering to the Jews. He wasn’t about to start a *new* church without telling His *old* church about it.

So Paul and Barnabas packed their bags, and headed for the showdown at the Jerusalem corral, as we see in Acts 15:3:

**“And being brought on their way by the church, they passed through Phenice and Samaria, declaring the conversion of the Gentiles: and they caused great joy unto all the brethren.”**

Now that business of “being brought on our way” means that as Paul and Barnabas were leaving the church in Antioch, the members of that assembly walked along with them because they hated to see them go. We see an example of this later in Acts 21:4,5, where Luke wrote:

**“…finding disciples, we tarried there seven days….And when we… departed and went our way…*they all brought us on our way,* with wives and children, till we were out of the city: and we kneeled down on the shore, and prayed” (Acts 21:4,5).**

You know how it is. When someone you love visits and then goes to leave, you walk them to the door, and then if it’s cold out, you throw on a coat and walk them to their car as well, because you hate to see them leave. And when Paul went to leave his home church here, *they too* brought him on his way, hating to see him leave.

Now the “brethren” in Phenice and Samaria there in verse 3—the ones who were happy to hear about the conversion of the Gentiles—were *Jewish* brethren who believed and got saved back when some preachers did what we read about in Acts 11:19:

**“…they…travelled as far as *Phenice*…preaching the word *to none but unto the Jews only.”***

Well hey, if they only preached to Jews, the brethren who believed in Phenice would be Jewish, right?

And so were the ones in Samaria, as we see in Acts 8:5,6:

**“Philip went down *to the city of Samaria,* and preached Christ unto them. *And the people with one accord gave heed unto those things which Philip spake”* (Acts 8:5,6).**

So those Samaritan brethren were *also* Jewish kingdom saints.

And the reason God is telling us about this here in Acts 15:3 is to show us that the average “Joe Jew” *rejoiced* to hear that God was now saving Gentiles without circumcision. The question was: would the *leaders* in Israel rejoice to hear about it?

This reminds me of how it says of the Lord,

**“…*the common people heard Him gladly.* And He said unto them… *Beware of the scribes…”* (Mark 12:37,38).**

The average “Joe Jew” in the Lord’s day *loved* what He was teaching. The problem was those scribes and other leaders in Israel *didn’t* love it.

And that might happen to Paul here as well. Now I know the leaders that Paul was going to see were *saved.* Unlike the scribes, the 12 apostles were believers. But *even believers* don’t always like dispensational change, as you know by experience if you’ve ever tried to *share* dispensational truth with believers! So let’s read on to see how the Jewish kingdom leaders in Jerusalem liked the dispensational change that Paul had come to tell them about:

**“And when they were come to Jerusalem, they were received of the church, and of the apostles and elders, and they declared all things that God had done with them” (Acts 15:4).**

As you can see, things were off to a pretty good start. The church at least *received* Paul, and let him present his case by declaring what God had done with him among the Gentiles.

But—and you knew there was a “but” coming!—it says in the next verse in Acts 15:

**“But there rose up certain of the sect of the Pharisees which believed, saying, That it was needful to circumcise them, and to command them to keep the law of Moses” (Acts 15:5).**

Now normally, when we think of Pharisees, we think of *unsaved* men, because they were so steeped in religion, it was hard for them to get saved. That’s why every time you turn around in the four gospels, you find the Pharisees opposing the Lord Jesus on every hand. But not even the Pharisees were beyond the power of God to save, and He saved *these* Pharisees!

But while they might be saved, they didn’t know about the new message of grace that God gave Paul to proclaim. So they stood by God’s *old* message of the law. And under the law, Gentiles not only had to be *circumcised* to be saved, they also had to *keep the law* to be saved, as those Jews in Acts 15:5 pointed out. That agrees with what Paul wrote in Galatians 5:3, when he told those brethren,

**“I testify…to every man that is circumcised, *that he is a debtor to do the whole law”* (Galatians 5:3).**

Getting circumcised was the first thing the law told a man to do. But when you did it, it obligated you to do the *rest* of the law! And what did Paul say about the law?

**“…we are not under the law, but under grace…” (Romans 6:15).**

And after Paul told *those leaders* that his new Gentile converts weren’t under the law, they called a council meeting:

**“And the apostles and elders came together for to consider of this matter” (Acts 15:6).**

This meeting has come to be known as “The Jerusalem Council” among Bible teachers. And the reason the Lord respected their authority enough to send Paul to get their stamp of approval on his new message is that it was *the Lord Himself* who *gave* the 12 their authority when He told them,

**“Whatsoever ye shall bind on earth *shall be bound in heaven:* and whatsoever ye shall loose on earth *shall be loosed in heaven”* (Matthew 18:18-20).**

That was the Lord’s way of saying, “Whatever you apostles decide down here, I’ll agree with in heaven!” He was giving them the power and authority to make decisions about God’s work after He ascended to the right hand of the Father.

And listen, the Lord didn’t give them that authority, and then expect Paul to *ignore* that authority and go on preaching grace without their approval.

And that approval was going to be hard to come by, as we see in the following verse in our text:

**“And when there had been much disputing, Peter rose up, and said unto them, Men and brethren, ye know how that a good while ago God made choice among us, that the Gentiles by my mouth should hear the word of the gospel, and believe” (Acts 15:7).**

Now what Peter is talking about there is how God sent him to preach to a Gentile named Cornelius back in Acts 10. And I don’t know if you’ve ever thought about that or not, but on the surface it didn’t seem to make a lot of sense for God to do that. I mean, God sent Peter *to the Jews* in Acts 1-8, and then He sent Paul to the Gentiles in Acts 9. So why would God send Peter to *one single Gentile* in Acts 10, and then never send him to any *other* Gentiles?

The answer is that God was *paving the way* for Paul’s ministry among the Gentiles by sending *Peter* to a Gentile to break the ice. I mean, think it through. Who better to introduce God’s *new* main apostle than His *old* main apostle?

And if sending a man to pave the way for another man sounds familiar, it’s because *that’s what God did for the Lord Jesus!* Before God sent *His Son* to the Jews, He sent *John the Baptist* to the Jews to pave the way for Him:

**“In those days came John the Baptist, *preaching in the wilderness of Judaea*…For this is he that was spoken of by the prophet Esaias, saying, The voice of one crying *in the wilderness,* Prepare ye the way of the LORD, *make His paths straight”* (Matthew 3:1,3).**

Here it helps to understand that John was the last of the Old Testament prophets, as we see when we consider Luke 16:16:

**“The law and the prophets *were until John:* since that time *the kingdom of God is preached…”***

The Old Testament law was God’s *old* program for the Jews, and the kingdom message was His *new* program for the Jews. So who better to introduce the *first* of the New Testament prophets than the *last* of the Old Testament prophets?

You do know the Lord was a prophet, don’t you? If not, look what happened in John 6:14:

**“Then those men, when they had seen the miracle that Jesus did, said, This is of a truth *that prophet that should come into the world.”***

They were talking about the prophet that Moses predicted would come, in the person of the Messiah, in Deuteronomy 18. But hey, *if the Son of God* needed a man to pave the way for Him, it’s not surprising that Paul would need Peter to pave the way for *him.*

But if you know the story, you know that God didn’t just use *John* to pave the way for the Lord. He also used *the Holy Spirit,* as we see when Matthew tells us *more* about John:

**“Then cometh Jesus…unto John, to be baptized of him…And… when He was baptized…the heavens were opened…*and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove, and lighting upon Him”* (Matthew 3:13,16).**

Now if you want to talk about paving the way for someone—we’re talkin’ real *bulldozer* type paving here! That had to be an *astonishing* sight!

But God also used the Spirit to introduce *Paul* and pave the way for *him,* as Peter went on to explain in verse 8 of our text:

**“And God, which knoweth the hearts, bare them witness, giving them the Holy Ghost, even as he did unto us.”**

Now if you know *that* story, you know that the Holy Ghost didn’t descend on Cornelius like a dove. Instead, Peter preached to Cornelius and his family, and then

**“While Peter yet spake these words, *the Holy Ghost fell on all them which heard the word.* And they of the circumcision which believed were *astonished*…because that on the Gentiles also was poured out the gift of the Holy Ghost.…*For they heard them speak with tongues…”* (Acts 10:44-46).**

Now if you don’t think that the Spirit causing men to speak in tongues was as big a bulldozer as when He fell on the Lord like a dove, I can assure you it was, for it says there there those Jews were positively *astonished* to see it! That’s because they knew it meant God had *done* something to those Gentiles, something we read about in Acts 15:9,

**“And put no difference between us and them, purifying their hearts by faith.”**

When the Spirit gave the Gentiles the same spiritual gift of tongues that He gave the Jews at Pentecost in Acts 2, that was God’s way of saying that there was no longer any difference between Jews and Gentiles. And that’s why those Jews were so astonished to hear those Gentiles speak in tongues. You see, back in the Old Testament, God made a *huge* difference between Jews and Gentiles. Look what God told the Jews in Leviticus 20:26:

**“I the LORD…have *severed you* from other people*,* that ye should be Mine.”**

That’s why Balaam said what he said about the people of Israel in Numbers 23:9:

**“…the people shall dwell alone, *and shall not be reckoned among the nations”***

Clearly, as far as God was concerned, the Jews were in a class all by themselves. And that’s the way things were *for the next 1500 years,* until the Spirit gave those Gentiles the same gift He gave the Jews. That happened around the time Paul was getting saved, if not at the very same time, a conversion that changed everything.

And when the Spirit did that for those Gentiles, Peter knew—as it says in verse 9—that God had purified their hearts by faith. Now don’t get confused there. Even *Jews* were saved by faith. Men have *always* been saved by faith, for

**“…*without* faith it is *impossible* to please Him” (Hebrews 11:6).**

Whatever God told men to believe to be saved, *they had to believe it!* And throughout the Old Testament, they had to believe God when He said they had to be circumcised and keep the law to be saved.

But God purified the hearts of those Gentiles in Acts 10 *without* circumcision and the law. *That’s* what Peter meant when he said that God purified their hearts “by faith.” He meant, by faith *alone!*

And God’s been doing that ever since! And He paved the way to do it through *Paul* by doing it first through *Peter.*

And here’s the kicker. When Peter reminded the council of his experience with Cornelius, he was reminding them that this issue had already been settled by them! You see, after Cornelius got saved by faith alone, the leaders of he Jewish church heard about it and took Peter to task about it, calling him out on the carpet in Acts 11:1-18:

**“…the apostles…heard that the Gentiles had also received the word of God. And when Peter was come up to Jerusalem, *they*…*contended with him…*But Peter rehearsed the matter…saying…*God gave them the like gift as He did unto us*…When they heard these things, they…glorified God, saying, *Then hath God also to the Gentiles granted repentance unto life.”***

Back in Acts 11, the apostles had already met with Peter to decide if the Gentiles to whom he ministered were saved without circumcision and the law. And when they heard that God gave them the same gift He gave the Jews, they recognized that God had saved those Gentiles *without* the law or circumcision.

And in bringing all that up here, Peter was saying, as it were, “You leaders already decided that Gentiles don’t need circumcision or the law to be saved, so why are you opening up that same can of worms all over again?”

And you have to admit, that’s a pretty good argument! I mean, an argument like that would hold up in court!

But Peter didn’t rest his case with that argument. He went on to press his point in the next verse of our text by asking those leaders a question:

**“Now therefore why tempt ye God, to put a yoke upon the neck of the disciples, which neither our fathers nor we were able to bear?” (Acts 15:10).**

Now the “yoke” Peter was talking about there was the yoke *of the law.* Paul called the law a yoke later when he warned the saved Gentiles in Galatia,

**“…be not entangled again *with the yoke of bondage…*every man that is circumcised…*is a debtor to do the whole law”* (Galatians 5:1,3).**

He was saying, as it were, “Don’t put on the yoke of the law by being circumcised, which is the *first* thing the law says to do, for if you do *you’re a debtor to do it all!”*

And the problem with *that* is: doing all the law meant doing it *perfectly* every day of your life, and never sinning *once,* as Paul made clear in that same epistle to the Galatians:

**“Cursed is every one that *continueth* not in *all* things which are written in the book of the law to *do* them” (Galatians 3:10).**

Under the law, you had to keep the law 100%, and you had to keep it perfectly *100% of the time.* That’s why James wrote,

**“…whosoever shall keep the whole law, and yet offend in *one* point, *he is guilty of all.* For He that said, Do not commit adultery, said also, Do not kill. Now if thou commit no adultery, yet if thou kill, *thou art become a transgressor of the law”* (James 2:10,11).**

You say, “Pastor, do you mean to tell me that if I go 70 years without sinning, then sin *one time,* that God will condemn me?” Well, let me ask you a question in return. If you go 70 years without killing anyone, and then snap and do someone in, will the judge let you slide? Will he say, “Well, he’s never killed anyone before, so I guess we’ll let him off the hook”? Of course not! Even the standards of *human* law won’t let you get away with that. So are you surprised to learn that God’s standards are as high as man’s?

Does that mean no one was ever saved under the law? Of course not! Men like Abraham and David were as saved as you are. But they got saved *by offering a sacrifice* for their sins, as the law said.

But a sacrifice had already been offered for these Gentiles here—*the sacrifice of Christ on the cross!* So why make them get circumcised and keep the law? Verse 10 of our text says that to do that would be to “tempt” God. The word “tempt” is the Bible word for *test,* or *try.* We see this when we compare some verses that talk about Abraham:

**“…God did *tempt* Abraham, and said…Take now thy son…and offer him…for a burnt offering…” (Genesis 22:1,2).**

Compare what you read there to what we see over in the New Testament:

**“…Abraham, when he was *tried*, offered up Isaac…” (Hebrews 11:17).**

God *tested* or *tried* Abraham’s faith there, and it would try God’s *patience* here to ask Gentiles to be circumcised now that God had proved by His Spirit that they didn’t *need* to be circumcised or keep the law.

And after Peter said all that, he delivered what they call in basketball *a dagger.* Back when the Bulls were in a close game, Michael Jordan would make a shot that would make it *impossible* for the other team to catch up and win, and they called that *the dagger.* Well, Peter delivered the dagger in the last verse of our text, a dagger that made it impossible for the Jews to win the argument, a dagger that went like this:

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

Peter was saying: “You guys are trying to make Gentiles get saved like we Jews get saved, by circumcision and the law. But truth be told, we Jews are going to be saved like the Gentiles, by grace!”

Now that’s a dagger! Peter’s stickin’ that dagger in and *twisting it!* But what exactly did he mean by that?

Well, you’ll notice that Peter is reminding those Jews that this was something *they already believed.* He said, *“We believe* that through the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, we shall be saved even as they.” They already believed that they were saved by a sacrifice, and not by circumcision or the law!

But if they were already saved, why does Peter say in verse 11, “we *shall* be saved”? It’s because their salvation works the same way yours does! You got saved the moment you believed the gospel, right? But if that’s true, why did Paul write,

**“…now is our salvation *nearer* than when we believed” (Romans 13:11).**

He’s talking about *the Rapture,* of course, the *completion* of our salvation! Right now, you’re just saved from the *penalty* of sin in hell. In that day, you’ll be saved from the *presence* of sin *in your life—*and the sin in everybody *else’s* life as well!

And someday, God is going to complete *Peter’s* salvation, along with the salvation of all the *other* Jewish kingdom saints, when He hears saved Jews say what He told them to say in Hosea 14:1,2,4:

**“O Israel…*take with you words,* and turn to the LORD; *say unto Him,* Take away all iniquity, and receive us *graciously…*I will heal their backsliding, I will love them *freely…”***

When God hears them say those words, He’s going to save them from the presence of sin *in the kingdom.* That’s when their lives will be as purified as their hearts! And when God does that, He plans to do it “graciously” as Hosea predicted. That’s what the word “freely” means—*graciously!*

If you’re glad that God has purified *your* heart by faith, and given you the prospect of receiving you just as graciously into heaven at the Rapture, why not thank Him for it *right now.*