**The Jerusalem Council Weighs the Evidence**

(Acts 15:12-18)

By Pastor Ricky Kurth

A scientist made headlines recently when he claimed that San Francisco was about to be hit by an earthquake. The San Francisco city council refused to believe him, however, because the evidence he gave to support his claim was shaky at best.

Speaking of city councils—and of evidence—here in Acts 15, the Apostle Paul is appearing before the *Jerusalem* council to try to convince those leaders of the Jewish kingdom church that his new message of salvation for Gentiles *apart from the law of Moses* was a message sent from God. In our last study, we saw the Apostle Peter remind the council that God had sent *him* to a Gentile, and *he* got saved without the law! And *then* he reminded them that, when that happened, those leaders decided that *that* was of God.

And as we are about to see, that was such a powerful, *unanswerable* argument that it left the council *speechless.*

**“Then all the multitude kept silence, and gave audience to Barnabas and Paul, declaring what miracles and wonders God had wrought among the Gentiles by them” (Acts 15:12).**

Now the reason Paul is telling those Jewish council leaders about the miracles God wrought by him among the Gentiles is due to something Paul told the Corinthians, when he wrote:

**“…the Jews *require* a sign…” (I Corinthians 1:22).**

So Paul was telling those Jewish leaders the one thing he knew they *needed* to be told before they would believe God was behind his ministry. God working miracles among the Gentiles to *corroborate* his ministry among the Gentiles!

And the thing about Bible miracles is: God never did *any* miracles *for Gentiles.* That explains why the psalmist *called* those miraculous signs what he called them in Psalm 74:9:

**“…we see not *our* signs…”**

Those signs *belonged* to the Jews!

Of course, as you can see from that verse, when the people of Israel disobeyed God, He *stopped* showing them miraculous signs. But He *never* gave their signs to the Gentiles—until God raised up *the Apostle Paul.*

And when the Jews on the council heard that God was working miracles among the Gentiles through Paul, they had to conclude that God was putting His stamp of approval on the idea of Gentiles getting saved without the law. It was quite a departure from how things were under the law, where Gentiles had to be circumcised and keep the law to be saved, but clearly God was doing something new with Paul.

But the official decision of the council had to come from the “head honcho” of the Jerusalem council. And he starts to do that in the next verse of our text, where we read what happened after Paul and Barnabas finished speaking:

**“And after they had held their peace, James answered, saying, Men and brethren, hearken unto me” (Acts 15:13).**

Now the “James” here is not the *apostle* James. Herod had *him* killed back in Acts 12. This is the James we read about in Galatians 1:19, “James *the Lord’s brother.”* Unlike what I was taught in the church in which I grew up, the Lord’s mother Mary had other children after His virgin birth, and James was one of them.

And when James says there, “hearken unto me,” that shows that he is going to be the one to render the council’s official decision. In fact, let’s peek ahead to verse 19 of Acts 15, to see what he decides:

**“Wherefore my sentence is, that we trouble not them, which from among the Gentiles are turned to God” (Acts 15:19).**

After hearing and weighing the evidence that we’ll consider in a moment, James decided that the Gentiles didn’t need to be troubled to keep the law to be saved. So he made the right decision!

But here we have to pause and ask: Who died and left *James* in charge of making final decisions? When the Lord was here on earth, He made *Peter* the main man in the Jewish kingdom church. But Peter doesn’t give the final word here on this matter. As a matter of fact, he didn’t even give the *first* word on the matter. Let ‘s look back up at Acts 15:6,7, where we’ll see that Peter wasn’t even allowed to give the opening remarks when the council convened:

**“And the apostles and elders came together for to consider of this matter.**

**“And when there had been much disputing, Peter rose up, and said unto them…” (Acts 15:6,7).**

Peter waited until all the other leaders finished duking it out before *he* finally spoke up. So he didn’t speak first *or* last, and you’d expect the main man head honcho to do one or the other.

So why has a man who wasn’t even one of the 12 apostles been allowed to replace Peter as the leader of the Jewish kingdom church? Well, frankly, the Bible doesn’t say, at least not to my knowledge. But I think it had to do with how things weren’t happening as the Old Testament said they would. I mean, after the Jews crucified the Lord, *the wrath of God* was supposed to fall on Israel—and it *hadn’t.*

Consider what David wrote in the prophetic second psalm:

***“Why do the heathen rage, and the people imagine a vain thing?* The kings of the earth…and the rulers take counsel together, against the LORD, *and against His anointed,* saying, Let us break their bands asunder, *and cast away their cords from us.* He that sitteth in the heavens shall *laugh:* the LORD shall have them in derision. *Then shall He speak unto them in His wrath, and vex them in His sore displeasure”* (Psalm 2:1-5).**

The “heathen” there are *the Gentiles.* The phrase “the people” in the Bible is almost always a reference to the people *of Israel.* The “kings” in this prophetic psalm are men like Pontius Pilate, and the “rulers” are the rulers *of Israel.* They all took counsel together against God the Father, and His anointed Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, in a vain effort to free themselves from the “cords” that bound them to God.

How was the Father supposed to react to their rebellion? As you can see, after He stopped *laughing* at their feeble insurrection, He was supposed to speak to the world in the “wrath” *of the Tribulation.* And when he *didn’t,* the Jews were left wondering *why* He didn’t. So naturally, they asked the guy who the Lord put in charge what had happened—*and* *Peter didn’t know!* You and I *now* know. We know from Paul’s epistles that instead of judging the world, God *interrupted* His prophetic program and introduced the dispensation of the grace.

But God didn’t tell *Peter* about the dispensation of grace! Paul said,

**“…the dispensation of the grace of God…is given *me* to you-ward…He made known unto *me* the mystery” (Ephesians 3:2,3).**

The dispensation of grace was a *mystery* that psalmists like David knew nothing about. No one knew anything about it! And that didn’t change in the New Testament, which means that *Peter* knew nothing about it as well.

So when Peter couldn’t tell the Jews why God’s wrath wasn’t *raining* down on them, they looked around for a new leader. And the picked James because James was big on the law of Moses! They figured if the Lord wasn’t going to come back and judge the world, and set up the kingdom that *Peter* was always talking about, they would to back to the law that *James* was always talking about. Remember what the Lord said about John the Baptist?

**“The law and the prophets were until John: *since that time the kingdom of God is preached…”* (Luke 16:16).**

The kingdom was supposed to come after the law was preached! And if the Lord wasn’t going to come back and conquer the world and *establish* the kingdom, I believe the Jews decided to go back to the law until they figured out what God was up to. And we know James was *big* on the law when we consider what happened in Acts 21:18,20, where

**“Paul went…unto James; and all the elders…And…they…said unto him, Thou seest, brother, how many thousands of Jews there are which believe; *and they are all zealous of the law.”***

Do you know how all those Jewish saints *got* so zealous of the law? It seems clear that James was *teaching* them the law—especially when you consider the emphasis on the law that you see in his one and only epistle:

**“…whoso looketh into the…law…*shall be blessed*… *fulfil* the…law…*keep* the whole law…thou art become a *transgressor* of the law…they… shall be *judged* by the law…He that…*speaketh evil* of the law, and *judgeth* the law…art not a *doer* of the law” (James 1:25; 2:8,10,11,12; 4:11).**

James had all those Jews positively *zealous* about the law! Now *that’s* the kind of guy they needed as their leader while they figured out why the kingdom that *Peter* was big on seemed to be on hold.

And *God Himself* must have thought that James should be their leader, because He had James *write a book of the Bible—*a book in which he *told* the Jews he was writing to (cf. James 1:1) to keep the law.

This shows that God approves of believers who stick with what they know while they’re trying to figure out the dispensational changes that He makes. I personally believe that God approves of Baptists and Pentecostals who stick by what *they* know while they try to figure out what *you* know. Of course, God will approve of them *more* when they *do* figure it out. But I don’t believe that we as grace believers have a monopoly on God’s approval.

So now, what’s this champion of the law going to say about Gentiles getting saved *without* the law under Paul’s preaching of “the gospel of the grace of God” (Acts 20:24)? Well, let’s read on and find out:

**“Simeon hath declared how God at the first did visit the Gentiles, to take out of them a people for his name” (Acts 15:14).**

Now “Simeon” is the Old Testament law’s version of Peter’s *New* Testament name, *Simon* Peter. James was so big on the law that he even used the law’s version of names! And he says, as it were, “Simeon has told us how God visited that Gentile family of Cornelius and saved him without the law, to take *out* of the Gentiles a people for His name”—a *saved* group of Gentiles out of the larger group of Gentiles as a whole. And it’s not surprising that God would do that “for His name.” Just about everything God does is for His great name’s sake.

But did you notice that James said absolutely *nothing* about the miracles he just heard Paul say God had worked among the Gentiles through him? Now why would that be, if Jews *require* miraculous signs, and are supposed to be so *impressed* by them? The answer is that Jews were supposed to be *more* impressed *by the Word of God!* At least that’s what God told them in Deuteronomy 13:1-3, where He said,

**“If there arise among you a prophet…and giveth thee a sign or a wonder, *And the sign or the wonder come to pass,* whereof he spake unto thee, saying, Let us go after other gods*…Thou shalt not hearken unto the words of that prophet…”***

God told His people in Israel, “If a guy who just worked a miracle says to worship idols—something the Bible says *not* to do—*you listen to the Bible.* Listen to My Word and *ignore* the miracle!”

And that’s what James is doing here. He knows that passage in Deuteronomy. He knows that miracles *alone* don’t prove that God is involved in something. For all James knows, Paul might be the miracle-working *antichrist* that Daniel predicted is coming.

So it wasn’t Paul’s *miracles* that convinced James that Paul was of God. James thought of some *Scripture* that convinced him—Scripture he *quotes* in the next two verses of our text:

**“And to this agree the words of the prophets; as it is written,**

**“After this I will return, and will build again the tabernacle of David, which is fallen down; and I will build again the ruins thereof, and I will set it up” (Acts 15:15,16).**

James says that Paul’s new ministry among the Gentiles agrees with something written in the prophets. So let’s take a look at the specific prophecy he had in mind. Speaking through the prophet Amos, God told His people,

**“In that day will I raise up the tabernacle of David that is fallen, and…raise up his ruins, and I will build it as in the days of old” (Amos 9:11).**

So what’s this “tabernacle of David” that Amos mentioned and James referenced in his quote? Well, the tabernacle that the people of Israel lugged around the wilderness was *a tent made of skins with the glory of God inside,* because the ark of the covenant was inside.

And you know what? The people of Israel were *also* a tent made of skins, with the glory of God inside *them.* So “the tabernacle of David” that fell down in the Old Testament, and needed to be built back up in the *New* Testament, *was the people of Israel.*

If you need help seeing that in those verses, look what David said about the tabernacle in II Samuel 7:2:

**“…the king said unto Nathan the prophet, See now, I dwell in an house of cedar, *but the ark of God dwelleth within curtains…”***

Even after many centuries had passed since they left the wilderness, God still dwelt with the “curtains” of the tabernacle. And it’s obvious from what David says that this bothered him, and he wanted to build God a *permanent* house, a temple.

And we know that God was *pleased* that he wanted to build it, because Solomon later said,

**“…the LORD said unto David my father, Whereas it was in thine heart to build an house unto My name, *thou didst well that it was in thine heart”* (I Kings 8:18).**

David got an “attaboy” *from God Himself!*

But God told Nathan,

**“…Go and tell my servant David, Thus saith the LORD, *Shalt thou build Me an house for Me to dwell in?...*In all the places wherein I have walked with all the children of Israel spake I a word…saying, Why build ye not Me an house of cedar? Now therefore so shalt thou say unto My servant David.…the LORD telleth thee that *He* will make *thee* an house…”**

**(II Samuel 7:3,5,8,11).**

God was so pleased with David for wanting to build Him a house that *He* promised to build *David* a house—but not a house of cedar. David already dwelt in one of those. God planned to make him a house of *people—*kind of like the “house *of Israel”* was a house of people. God actually planned to make David *into* a house of people, as He went on to explain to David, saying:

**“…when…thou shalt sleep with thy fathers, I will set up thy seed after thee…and I will establish his kingdom…Andthine house *and thy kingdom* shall be established…” (IISamuel 7:12,16).**

Now David’s “seed” there was his son Solomon. So the house of David—the *tabernacle* of David that God was going to build up after David died *was the house of Israel,* the people who lived in the kingdom Solomon inherited from David. You probably noticed the way God linked David’s “house” to his kingdom there.

And God *did* build David that house and kingdom. The Davidic kingdom that Solomon inherited was the grandest kingdom on the planet. But that kingdom *fell down* when the people of Israel *rebelled* against God, and God let Nebuchadnezzer, king of Babylon, tear it down. But Amos predicted that someday God would build Solomon’s kingdom back up! That’s why the 12 apostles asked the Lord,

**“Lord, wilt Thou at this time *restore again the kingdom to Israel?”* (Acts 1:6).**

When the 12 used that word “restore” there, they meant: “restore the kingdom *like we knew it under Solomon.”*

A short time later, the Lord sent Peter out to *try* to restore it in Acts Chapters 1-7, but the people of Israel refused God’s restoration when they stoned Stephen in Acts 7. But someday, God is going to set up the tabernacle of David’s house *in the kingdom of heaven on earth.*

And we *know* it will happen in the kingdom because of something we see in the context of Amos 9:

**“In that day will I raise up the tabernacle of David that is fallen…Behold, the days come, saith the LORD, *that the plowman shall overtake the reaper, and the treader of grapes him that soweth seed…”* (Amos 9:11,13).**

That’s a description of the agricultural conditions in the kingdom! That’s when crops are going to grow so *amazingly* in Israel that the reapers won’t have to wait until spring to plant another crop. They’ll be hot on the heels of the sowers!

And that’s *also* when God will build up David’s tabernacle of people that fell down in the Old Testament in Solomon’s kingdom.

Now I know that all that makes it sound like God only loved the Jews, and only wanted *them* to be saved. But James goes on to explain *why* God’s going to build David a house in the kingdom in the next verse of our text. He says that God is going to build it,

**“That the residue of men might seek after the Lord, and all the Gentiles, upon whom my name is called, saith the Lord, who doeth all these things” (Acts 15:17).**

As you can see, after God restores the kingdom to Israel, the residue of men—the *rest* of the men in the world—are going to seek the Lord. At least the ones who call on God’s name, as it says there.

Isaiah predicted this when he wrote,

**“…*the Gentiles shall come to thy light,* and kings to the brightness of thy rising… *the abundance of the sea shall be converted unto thee,* the forces of the Gentiles shall come unto thee” (Isaiah 60:3,5).**

The “rising” there is the rising that the kingdom of Israel will experience when God raises them up from the ruins into which they fell in time past. When the Gentiles see that, they are going to be drawn to Israel *to learn about Israel’s God,* as we see again in Isaiah 2:

**“in the last days…the mountain of the LORD’S house shall be established in the top of the mountains, and shall be exalted above the hills; *and all nations shall flow unto it.* And many people shall go and say, Come ye, and let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the house of the God of Jacob; *and He will teach us of His ways…* for out of Zion shall go forth the law, *and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem”* (Isaiah 2:2,3).**

All of that will still happen after the Rapture, and after the Tribulation. But in the meantime, Gentiles are being saved through Israel’s *fall,* not her rise! Paul wrote of Israel that “through *their fall* salvation is come unto the Gentiles” (Rom.11:11).

And that’s why James didn’t say that Paul’s ministry *fulfilled* the prophecy of Amos. What word did he use instead in Acts 15:15? *“Agree”!* Paul’s ministry couldn’t fulfill *any* prophecies, for his ministry was part of the mystery that was hid from the prophets. But Paul’s ministry certainly agreed with the *spirit* of the prophecy.

You’ll notice that James *also* didn’t use the word Peter used when he saw men speaking in tongues, and said,

**“This *is* that which was spoken by the prophet Joel…” (Acts 2:16).**

He didn’t say that what was happening at Pentecost just “agreed” with what Joel had written. He said, “This *is* that!”

But James didn’t say that! He didn’t say that Paul’s ministry *is* that which was spoken by the prophet Amos. He said it *agreed* with it. I think he just shrugged his shoulders and said, as it were, “Well, the salvation of the Gentiles is what God wanted all along, so what Paul’s doing certainly *agrees* with what God wanted all along, so I’m going to approve Paul’s new ministry of grace among the Gentiles!”

But before we read on, let me show you one more reason why Paul’s ministry couldn’t fulfil what Amos predicted. You see, in quoting from Amos 9, James *left out* a word from the quotation, and *added* a word as well, as we see in Acts 9:11,12:

**“In that day will I raise up the tabernacle of David that is fallen…and I will build it as in the days of old: That *they* may *possess*…the heathen, which are called by My name, saith the LORD that doeth this” (Amos 9:11,12).**

First, did you notice the addition of the word “they” there? If you didn’t know what we just studied out, you’d think that “the tabernacle of David” would be referred to as an “it,” not as “they.” But as we’ve seen, the tabernacle of David that Amos had in mind was a tabernacle of *people,* the people of Israel.

And someday, in the kingdom of heaven on earth, the people of Israel are going to *possess* the Gentiles, as Amos said there, using the word that James omitted. That is, they are going to possess them as *servants,* bondservants—*slaves,* in other words, as Isaiah predicted when he wrote,

***“…the sons of strangers shall build up thy walls,* and their kings shall minister unto thee” (Isaiah 60:10).**

We see it again in Isaiah 61:5, where God promised His people,

**“…*strangers shall stand and feed your flocks,* and the sons of the alien *shall be your plowmen and your vinedressers.”***

You say, “Wait a minute! Are you telling me there are going to be *slaves* in the kingdom of heaven on earth? That doesn’t sound very heavenly to me, at least not from the slaves’ point of view!

But these won’t be *kidnapped* slaves, like we had in our own country, and as we’ve seen in so many other countries throughout history. These are *voluntary* slaves who’ll be so grateful to Jews for teaching them about God that they will *willingly* be their bondservants. I can’t tell you how many times people have offered to do things for me *just because I teach them the Word of God.*

But let me tell you, I’m not joining any caravan to go to Jerusalem to be *their* plowmen and vinedressers. They wouldn’t want me anyway. My plow lines would be all over the place, as opposed to the nice straight plow lines made by farmers who know what they’re doing!

Now I know that a lot of well-meaning but misguided Christians want to go to Israel to build the Jews a *temple—*but they *shouldn’t.* Do you know why? It’s because the Word of God isn’t going forth from Jerusalem in the dispensation of grace! It’s going forth from places like *Berean Bible Society,* and *Faith Bible Church* of Steger, Illinois. So if you want to be my slave, the line forms on the right, now that Rick is back in town.

But before James rendered his sentence, the sentence with which we’ll begin our study in our next lesson, he said *one more thing* that we must take the time to consider, for it’s too precious to just gloss over. In the last verse of our text, James said,

**“Known unto God are all his works from the beginning of the world” (Acts 15:18).**

In other words, he’s saying, “God has known everything He’s ever planned to do from the beginning of the world.” Now why would he say that?

Well, I can’t prove it, but I think it was because Paul had talked to the council about *the mystery,* and how God knew from the beginning of the world that He would save Gentiles without the law in the dispensation of grace. He knew it all along! He just didn’t *say* anything about it!

If you need more proof that God was thinking of us in Amos 9, look how Amos described God earlier in that chapter:

**“It is He that buildeth *His stories* in the heaven…” (Amos 9:6).**

Now those are not the kind of stories that you grandparents tell your grandchildren. Those are the kinds of stories like when we say that the Sears Tower in Chicago is 110 stories tall. Those stories are *levels of government* in heaven that *fell* when Satan and his host disobeyed God—just like *Solomon’s* kingdom on earth fell when *they* disobeyed God. As we’ve seen, Amos went on to talk about restoring Solomon’s kingdom—but he said *absolutely nothing* about restoring those stories. *Nobody* did! No one did until *Paul* came along and explained how God will someday restore those stories with the likes of you and I, members of the Body of Christ.

And someday, you and I will be *movin’ on up* to what the Jefferson’s used to call, “that deluxe apartment in the sky”!