

## Acts 15A

- Paul's first missionary journey with Barnabas is almost complete
  - Refer to the map of this initial journey
    - The journey has lasted nearly 2 years as best we can tell
    - After his first journey Paul wrote his first epistle, Galatians, shortly after attending the council of Jerusalem
      - Having just established a series of new Gentile churches, it makes sense that Paul would have been moved to write letters to these churches
      - The letter to the Galatians is written to the churches of Galatia, which refers to the churches Paul established in this first journey
  - And as the trip nears its conclusion, the apostles reach a few more cities, largely without opposition
- As we left last week, Paul had just recovered from his stoning
  - And He leaves the next day on a trip to the next town, Derbe

[Acts 14:19](#) ¶ But Jews came from Antioch and Iconium, and having won over the crowds, they stoned Paul and dragged him out of the city, supposing him to be dead.

[Acts 14:20](#) But while the disciples stood around him, he got up and entered the city. The next day he went away with Barnabas to Derbe.

[Acts 14:21](#) After they had preached the gospel to that city and had made many disciples, they returned to Lystra and to Iconium and to Antioch,

[Acts 14:22](#) strengthening the souls of the disciples, encouraging them to continue in the faith, and saying, "Through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God."

- In Derbe they make many converts and establish yet another Gentile church
  - Then they begin to retrace their steps back through the various churches in Asia Minor where they have established beachheads for the gospel
    - From Derbe they head back to Lystra, Iconium and Antioch
      - Antioch here is not the Antioch where the first church was established

- This is a different Antioch in modern-day Turkey (see map)
- As they revisit each church, Paul and Barnabas bring a message of comfort
  - Luke sums the message in v.22
  - Many tribulations will be the common uniting experience of the faith
- We must imagine that after Paul and Barnabas left each church, the persecution that fell upon the apostles transferred to the new believers
  - Either from Jews or Gentiles, the early believers were under attack
  - And these new believers were probably unprepared for this type of religious persecution
  - Such persecution was probably rare and they may have misunderstood it's meaning
    - Perhaps it meant that God was unhappy or that the faith was not true?
  - Paul explains that trials and tribulations should be expected
    - And no doubt Paul pointed to his own experience as proof

[Acts 14:23](#) When they had appointed elders for them in every church, having prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord in whom they had believed.

[Acts 14:24](#) ¶ They passed through Pisidia and came into Pamphylia.

[Acts 14:25](#) When they had spoken the word in Perga, they went down to Attalia.

[Acts 14:26](#) From there they sailed to Antioch, from which they had been commended to the grace of God for the work that they had accomplished.

[Acts 14:27](#) When they had arrived and gathered the church together, they began to report all things that God had done with them and how He had opened a door of faith to the Gentiles.

[Acts 14:28](#) And they spent a long time with the disciples.

- On the return trip, Paul leaves each church with leaders
  - He appoints elders
    - And Paul appointed them, they were not elected

- We'll never see a congregation form of church government in Scripture
  - The Biblical model is always a process of appointment by men who received their leadership roles by similar appointment
  - The church has always moved forward at the hands of men and women who answer the Spirit's call and anointing
    - Then are sent by elders to establish a new work
    - Once the work takes hold, the leader establishes new leaders, and so on
- The Bible never supports the view that there is a pope or utmost church leader on earth
  - But there is a chain of anointing and commissioning expected
  - We have "fathers" in the faith and church leaders who have been established by the Spirit's anointing and confirmed by earlier leaders
- Secondly, the elders are plural in each church
  - The concept of a single pastor-led model is not Biblical either
    - While a new church may rely on a single leader for a time, as the church in Ephesus did with Timothy or Titus
    - But as the church grows, the expectation becomes that the leader appoint co-leaders

[Titus 1:5](#) ¶ For this reason I left you in Crete, that you would set in order what remains and **appoint elders** in every city as I directed you,

- Finally, Paul and Barnabas commend these new believers to the Lord
  - When we think about how hard it was to communicate or travel over long distances
    - And then considered the threats and challenges these new churches must have faced as Gentiles in the early church
    - No NT, no large library of Christian writing or culture

- No support structure and history in the faith
  - We have to marvel that the church survived at all...until we remember that it exists and grows by the power of God
- And it was upon this truth that Paul rested as well
  - He commends the church to the Lord because he knows that the church is always in His hands
  - And Paul and Barnabas will be a long way away for many years and must depend on the Lord to take care of these believers
- Paul wraps up his victory lap in Perga and then heads over to Attalia
  - Finally, from there he sails back to Antioch of Syria where the first church is still present and growing
    - And they commend Paul and Barnabas on all they have accomplished and on the work of the Lord in opening a door for Gentiles
- Now we transition into chapter 15 to learn of an early challenge to the orthodoxy of the church

[Acts 15:1](#) Some men came down from Judea and began teaching the brethren, "Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved."

[Acts 15:2](#) And when Paul and Barnabas had great dissension and debate with them, the brethren determined that Paul and Barnabas and some others of them should go up to Jerusalem to the apostles and elders concerning this issue.

[Acts 15:3](#) Therefore, being sent on their way by the church, they were passing through both Phoenicia and Samaria, describing in detail the conversion of the Gentiles, and were bringing great joy to all the brethren.

- The scene begins in Antioch of Syria where Paul and Barnabas are still ministering
  - The men came from Judea and were of the circumcision party
    - These were the same men who had challenged Peter for being willing to enter the home of a Gentile
  - They come to Antioch of their own initiative

- The fact they decide to travel from Judea all the way to Syria to confront Paul's growing ministry to the Gentiles tells you how much this issue has become THE issue for them
  - In my personal experience, I run into this kind of obsessive single-mindedness within the church
  - I meet an individual or small group of people who define their Christian life and purpose by a single theme or idea
    - Sometimes the theme is hyper national patriotism
    - Or Gentiles trying to mimic or adopt Jewish practices and lifestyle
    - Or natural remedies and healthy eating
    - Or whatever the fad of the week may be
- The problem with this narrow focus is the way it creates selective attention
  - When we adopt a "thing" we see everything through the lens of that issue
    - Alistair Begg tells a story of an American pastor who asked him what his "thing" was...
  - And our focus leads to an unbalanced and uneven Christian maturing...or even a failure to mature
    - You will only attend to this topic of interest and ignore other important areas of Christian growth
- More troubling, this narrow focus can lead in extreme cases to a warped theology and even a false gospel
  - This has happened here
  - The desire to cherish a long-standing Jewish mandate leads to a expectation that Gentiles adopt it as well
    - And to force this outcome, these men teach that God Himself has made it a requirement for acceptance into the Christian faith
    - In other words, a work was required to be saved

- This same problem was also happening in other Gentile churches
  - While in Antioch the problem is circumcision, in Galatia it was the Law as a whole
  - Men were teaching that keeping the Law was required salvation
    - Which is why Paul wrote the letter of Galatians while in Antioch
    - Listen to Paul's opening words in that letter...

[Gal. 1:1](#) ¶ Paul, an apostle ( not sent from men nor through the agency of man, but through Jesus Christ and God the Father, who raised Him from the dead),  
[Gal. 1:2](#) and all the brethren who are with me, ¶ To the churches of Galatia:  
[Gal. 1:3](#) ¶ Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ,  
[Gal. 1:4](#) who gave Himself for our sins so that He might rescue us from this present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father,  
[Gal. 1:5](#) to whom be the glory forevermore. Amen.  
[Gal. 1:6](#) ¶ I am amazed that you are so quickly deserting Him who called you by the grace of Christ, for a different gospel;  
[Gal. 1:7](#) which is really not another; only there are some who are disturbing you and want to distort the gospel of Christ.

- When these men reach Antioch, Paul and Barnabas confront these men
  - And they strongly resist this teaching
    - And they debate these men at length
      - The word for dissension means strife in Greek
      - The unity of Antioch that Luke described earlier is now threatened by wrong teaching
  - Knowing Paul's ability and track record in debating false teaching, it's surprising that the church didn't immediately accept Paul's point of view
    - But for the benefit of the church as a whole, God causes the argument to simmer for a while until the leaders in the church determine a course of action
- The church leaders decide that the issue should be resolved by a meeting in Jerusalem with the Apostles as a whole
  - Remember, that Peter has the keys to the kingdom and he had the power to bind and loose on earth as in heaven

- This refers to the power to permit or forbid certain practices or beliefs for the purpose of setting church doctrine and practice
- The discussion must move to Jerusalem for the apostles can meet and include Peter for the final decision
- So they send Paul, Barnabas, and other men
  - We know from Galatians that Paul took Titus
  - And we can assume that some representatives of the other point of view attend as well
- It's noteworthy that the leaders in this church do not include Paul and Barnabas at this point
  - They submit themselves to the authority of the elders
  - What a demonstration of submission to authority Paul and Barnabas demonstrate here
    - They are the founding members of the church and Apostles no less
  - They might have demanded the elders kick out the trouble makers and simply accept the Apostles' word as a final answer
    - Instead, they follow the instructions of the elders
- Since they have to take a long journey south through Phoenicia, the Galilee and Samaria, the Apostles take the opportunity to inform the church of all that was happening among the Gentiles
  - The Phoenician church were Gentiles while the Samaritan church was Samaritans
    - Both of these groups would have been greatly encouraged to hear of other Gentiles joining the church
  - But as they progressed to Jerusalem, Paul would have encountered more and more Jewish church
    - And they probably reacted differently to the news
  - And it must have concerned and excited the young Jewish church
    - Though it was a sign of the power of the Gospel

- And it brought the Jews comfort to know that they were not along
- Instead, they were begin joined by the world of Gentiles into faith
- Yet it brought concerns too
  - What would happen to the Jewish culture within the early church?
  - Would the Jewish church become overwhelmed by Gentiles
  - And would the Jewish traditions and customs be lost?
- This is likely at the core of why the Party of the Circumcision was trying to convert Gentiles to Judaism first
  - And out of fear, they were trying to stop the inevitable
    - They were resisting God's desire to create a Gentile bride for Christ
- We now see that motive in the first meeting of the Apostles in Jerusalem

[Acts 15:4](#) When they arrived at Jerusalem, they were received by the church and the apostles and the elders, and they reported all that God had done with them.

[Acts 15:5](#) But some of the sect of the Pharisees who had believed stood up, saying, "It is necessary to circumcise them and to direct them to observe the Law of Moses."

- After giving their initial report on the rapid growth of the church among Gentiles, certain men objected
  - A sect of the Pharisees, which refers to the Party of the Circumcision from Acts 11:2
  - They demand both circumcision and the following of the Law
    - It makes sense that Pharisees would expect submission to the Law since they themselves defined themselves by their scrupulous adherence to the Law
    - This is an example narrow focus on a single theme of Christian living
      - And in this case, the theme wasn't a Christian theme



- It's an unChristian theme that distorts the Gospel
- In chapter 2 of his letter to Galatia, Paul describes how this meeting began
  - He arrived with Barnabas and Titus
    - He immediately met with Peter, James and John to see how they felt about the matter
    - Paul says he submitted to them the story of how he preached the Gospel to the Gentiles
      - When Paul says "how" he means not merely that the Gentiles were receiving the Gospel...that wasn't news to anyone
      - Rather, he means of how he preached faith without works was the mean to salvation
    - Paul wanted to find out if Peter and the rest of the Apostles were preaching the same Gospel
  - Paul's private meeting results in the Apostles agreeing that this is the true Gospel and they plan in secret for how they will conduct the public meeting with the Gentiles and others
    - When that meeting takes place, the Apostles are already of one mind to reject the Pharisees call for Gentiles to submit to circumcision and following the Law

[Acts 15:6](#) ¶ The apostles and the elders came together to look into this matter.

[Acts 15:7](#) After there had been much debate, Peter stood up and said to them, "Brethren, you know that in the early days God made a choice among you, that by my mouth the Gentiles would hear the word of the gospel and believe.

[Acts 15:8](#) "And God, who knows the heart, testified to them giving them the Holy Spirit, just as He also did to us;

[Acts 15:9](#) and He made no distinction between us and them, cleansing their hearts by faith.

[Acts 15:10](#) "Now therefore why do you put God to the test by placing upon the neck of the disciples a yoke which neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear?

[Acts 15:11](#) "But we believe that we are saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, in the same way as they also are."

- Luke says a meeting is held to consider the demands of the Pharisees
  - Luke indicates in v.7 there was much debate, but the debate wasn't among the Apostles
    - It was among the Gentiles and elders and Pharisees
    - According to Galatians 2, the Apostles have already met and agreed on a course of action
      - The Apostles observed and listened
- Finally, we finally see Peter end the debate and stand up and make his decision known
  - By allowing the room to voice opinions first, the Apostles gain a useful advantage
    - First, they learn who among the prominent men of the church understand the Gospel properly and who don't
    - Secondly, they give the body a chance to feel a part of the process and helps cement their acceptance of the Apostles' decree
  - Peter speaks for the last time in the book of Acts
    - Peter begins by reminding the crowd that it was God Himself Who made a choice over 10 years earlier to include the Gentiles in the church
      - The circumstances of Cornelius' salvation made clear to everyone that it was God Who decided to make this happen
    - And that choice was made clearest by the fact that God visibly gave Gentiles the same Spirit
      - Here again we see the unique significance for God making the arrival of the Holy Spirit visible at times during the early church
      - It was a watershed moment when Gentiles believed, and God made sure everyone knew that the Spirit had arrived
  - Peter goes on to point out that the arrival of the Spirit resulted in a cleansing that was universal and common to both Gentile and Jew

- And then Peter makes his turn with one of the most powerful statements against legalism in the Bible
  - First, he says why do they test God?
    - The word test here means that to doubt the Gentiles' entrance into the church on the basis of faith alone would be to call into question God's judgment in the matter
      - Since God Himself has made clear His intent to include Gentiles on the same terms He included the Jews already
      - When Pharisees asked Gentiles to do more than God required, they are testing God
  - Secondly, Peter compares the demands of the Pharisees as a yoke on the neck of the disciples
    - Notice that Peter uses the word disciple to refer to the Gentiles, clearly indicating Peter's view that they are brothers in the faith
    - And he sees the requirements levied by the Pharisees as a yoke or burden
      - And Peter adds that not even the religiously observant Jew was capable of bearing this yoke successfully, referring to keeping the law
      - Peter's statement is revealing because it indicates that the Pharisees in the church still believed they were keeping the Law
        - Peter correctly states that no one keeps the Law
        - Not the fathers and not us
      - So why think that the Gentiles could do it either?
  - Peter correctly states that salvation is by the grace of God alone
    - Grace means that God doesn't recognize merit or achievement
      - He grants a pardon for His own purposes
- When we ask someone to perform a work as part of their salvation that we ourselves are not even able to perform adequately, we are hypocrites and we sin

- And in this case, the sin is made worse because the Pharisees insistence that this work is a requirement for salvation
- Imagine how much damage would have been done to the early church is the Pharisees' view had prevailed?
  - How many Gentiles would have found the Gospel to be "good news" if it included the requirement to be circumcised and perform the Law?
  - Similarly, when our presentation of the Gospel includes any suggestion of legalism, we test God
    - If we propose new rules for living, new standards of behavior, new cultural expectations, we repeat the sin of the Pharisee
    - We are adding works, whether intended or not, and we are acting hypocritically, since we ourselves invariably violate any rule we offer
- Legalism is pernicious and easily overlooked in our evangelistic patterns
  - We should preach and teach salvation by grace through faith in Christ and nothing more
  - Any discussion of godly living and standard of conduct are premature for anyone who is considering the truth of the Gospel
    - And for those who have believed, any discussion of behavior must be divorced from a conversation of whether they are saved
    - They are saved by grace alone through faith alone
    - Behaviors are simply not a part of that conversation