Acts 2024 Juan Seo (Aug 11, 2024)

**THE JERUSALEM COUNCIL**

Acts 15:1-35

Key Verse 15:11

**No! We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved, just as they are.”**

Our mission team is faithfully serving the Belize Summer Bible Conference through praise songs and testimony. It is very challenging to go to a country with difficult conditions like Belize for a mission. Look at this picture: Sam Choi and Timothy Han are cooling off in front of an air conditioner because of the heat. We should continue to pray for our mission team, including Sarah Choi Bae and Becky Bae. They will return to New York tomorrow.

The story of the Jerusalem Council is located at the very center of the book of Acts. From this point onward, the narrative of Acts focuses on Gentile missions led by the Apostle Paul. Therefore, the theologian Ben Witherington said, “It is no exaggeration to say that Acts 15 is the most crucial chapter in the whole book.” The Jerusalem church, which was mostly composed of Jews, faced serious cultural conflicts when they began accepting Gentiles into Christianity. This was an unexpected issue. If they had not resolved it, they would have faced significant difficulties in spreading the Gospel of Jesus Christ to the Gentile world. So, they held the Jerusalem Council, where they prayed together and sought the guidance of the Holy Spirit through God’s Word. By doing so, they discovered God’s will and made decisions that pleased Him. As a result, the Gospel of Jesus Christ was able to spread even further, reaching many more Gentiles.

Look at verse 1. ***Certain people came down from Judea to Antioch and were teaching the believers: “Unless you are circumcised, according to the custom taught by Moses, you cannot be saved."*** The author Luke does not specifically reveal who the certain people from Judea were, but we can infer from verse 5 that they were the believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees. These Pharisee believers held the belief that one must keep the Law of Moses to be saved. Their visit to Antioch was not by chance; they had planned it in advance to teach their doctrine. Furthermore, as we see in verse 23, these Pharisee believers went to the churches in Syria and Cilicia as well to teach the same doctrine. However, they acted without the authorization of the leaders of the Jerusalem church (24). In other words, they represented only a party of the Pharisee believers, not the entire Jerusalem church.

In fact, the Jerusalem church had already heard the report from the Apostle Peter about preaching the Gospel to the Gentile, Cornelius, more than ten years earlier. And when they heard it, they had no further objections and praised God, saying, ***“So then, even to Gentiles God has granted repentance that leads to life”*** (11:18). They had already accepted that Gentiles could be saved without circumcision. However, among the believers in Jerusalem, there were likely some who resisted accepting Gentiles into the Christian community without them being circumcised and following the Law of Moses. As time went on and more Gentiles joined the church community, their conviction that Gentiles should be circumcised and follow the Law grew stronger. Eventually, they went directly to the Gentile churches to teach their doctrine.

Paul and Barnabas had a sharp dispute and debate with these Pharisee believers. This was because the doctrine they taught—***'Unless you are circumcised, according to the custom taught by Moses, you cannot be saved'***—was a very dangerous teaching that shook the faith of the Gentile believers to its core. Paul and Barnabas had taught that ***'everyone who believes in Jesus is set free from every sin.'*** They taught that ***salvation comes through faith in Jesus, who forgives our sins through His sacrifice on the cross***. They had never taught that one must be circumcised or keep the Law of Moses to be saved.

Let's imagine that an elder from Chicago UBF came to New York UBF and taught, 'You cannot be saved unless you observe the Sabbath on Saturday, as well as the Jewish festivals like Passover, Pentecost, and the Feast of Tabernacles.' Wouldn't some of you be confused? Of course, I believe that most of the leaders and members of New York UBF are spiritually mature, so you wouldn't be shaken by such false teachings. However, new believers might become confused. In that case, P. Juan Seo wouldn't stay silent. I would have a sharp dispute and debate with that elder because I want the members of New York UBF to stand firmly on the truth of Jesus Christ.

In this situation, what decision did the Antioch church make? Look at the second part of verse 2: ***“So Paul and Barnabas were appointed, along with some other believers, to go up to Jerusalem to see the apostles and elders about this question.”*** The Antioch church made a very wise decision by sending delegates, including Paul and Barnabas, to Jerusalem to discuss this matter with the apostles and elders. What would have happened if they had reacted out of anger and said, 'We can't trust the Jerusalem church,' or 'We’ll go our own way regardless of what the Jerusalem church says'? There could have been a division between the Jewish church and the Gentile church, which could have shattered the unity of the church.

It seems that the Jerusalem Council had at least three separate meetings over several days. The first meeting was a general session where Paul and Barnabas reported everything God had done through them (vv. 4-5). The second meeting was a separate meeting between the apostles, the elders, Paul, and Barnabas (vv. 6-11). The third meeting was a general assembly to listen to Barnabas, Paul, and James (vv. 12-22). The key leaders who played a significant role in the Jerusalem Council were Peter, James, the Pharisee Christians, and Paul and Barnabas. They represented three different perspectives of the believers at that time regarding the relationship between salvation and the Law.

***First, the Pharisee Christian point of view.*** This perspective is clearly expressed in verses 1 and 5. The Pharisee Christians, despite believing in Jesus, held the view that one must follow the Law of Moses, including circumcision, to be saved, just as was taught in Judaism. In short, their argument was that all Christians must first become Jews. According to the Talmud, the Law of Moses is composed of a total of 613 commandments. Who could possibly keep all 613 commandments? No Jew, including the Pharisees, could fully obey all 613 laws. The Apostle Peter clearly pointed this out in his speech: ***“Why do you try to test God by putting on the necks of Gentiles a yoke that neither we nor our ancestors have been able to bear?”*** (10). If the argument of these Pharisee Christians had been accepted, Christianity could have been reduced to merely a sect of Judaism. This would have posed a serious obstacle to the spread of the Gospel of Jesus Christ throughout the world.

***Second, the Gentile Christian point of view.*** This perspective is represented by Paul and Barnabas, who led the mission to the Gentiles, as well as by the Apostle Peter, who, through God's guidance, preached the Gospel to Cornelius and opened the door for Gentile missions. Though he was called to be an apostle for the Jews, he also played a crucial role in the mission to the Gentiles. Peter was a devout Jew. When God showed him unclean animals and commanded, ***“Get up, Peter. Kill and eat,”*** he refused even in a state of hunger and confusion. Peter’s stance on the Law was so absolute that he even refused God's command. However, through his experience with Cornelius, Peter came to understand God's heart for the salvation of the Gentiles. Seeing the Holy Spirit come upon the Gentiles, he baptized them and proclaimed their salvation, even though they had not been circumcised.

Thus, Peter actively represented the perspective of Gentile Christians at the Jerusalem Council. He first testified about God’s actions in saving the Gentiles: ***God chose the Gentiles*** (7), ***showed His acceptance*** (8), and ***did not discriminate between Jews and Gentiles*** (9). Peter then pointed out the actions of humans who opposed God’s actions (10). In conclusion, he proclaimed the truth that both Jews and Gentiles are saved not by the Law but by the grace of Jesus Christ. ***“We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved, just as they are”*** (11).

***Third, the Jerusalem Christian point of view.*** This perspective was represented by James, the president of the Jerusalem church. He delivered a speech based on Amos 9:11-12, explaining God’s will to rebuild David’s fallen tent through the rest of mankind, even all the Gentiles who bear his name. James agreed with Peter’s perspective, clearly stating that it is God’s will for Gentiles to accept the Gospel of Jesus and be saved by grace. He said, ***“We should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God”*** (19).

At the same time, James added four prohibitions for the Gentile Christians: ***“to abstain from food polluted by idols, from sexual immorality, from the meat of strangled animals, and from blood”*** (20). Why did James include these four prohibitions? Would breaking these prohibitions cause Gentiles to lose their salvation? Are these four prohibitions universally applicable to us today, across all time? If so, does that mean our Korean missionaries who enjoy *Sundaeguk* (blood sausage soup) have already broken the law and cannot be saved? What about our brothers and sisters who like to eat their steak rare? And why weren’t other important commandments from the Ten Commandments, like 'You shall not murder,' 'You shall not steal,' or 'You shall not give false testimony against your neighbor,' included in these prohibitions?

These prohibitions are found in Leviticus 17-18, which were applied not only to the Jews but also to the Gentiles living among them. Sexual immorality was also closely connected to idolatry. At that time, Jews would not associate with Gentiles who violated these laws. Therefore, if Gentiles who believed in Jesus and joined the Christian community continued to eat food polluted by idols or meat with blood, it would be very difficult for the Jews to accept them. Faithful Jews would not have fellowship with Gentile Christians participating in these acts. Thus, the fourfold prohibition in James’s speech allowed Jewish and Gentile Christians to remain in communion with each other. The intent behind these guidelines was to foster mutual respect, allowing the Jewish believers to avoid placing legalistic burdens like circumcision on the Gentiles, while encouraging Gentiles to refrain from practices that Jews found offensive. This way, Jewish and Gentile Christians could come together in unity and respect.

Later, the Apostle Paul told the Corinthian believers that an idol is nothing at all in the world and took the position that it was permissible to eat food sacrificed to idols (1 Cor 8:4). However, he also said that he would refrain from eating such food for the sake of brothers and sisters with weaker faith (1 Cor 8:13). Therefore, these prohibitions do not apply to us in the same way. The key point here is that these four prohibitions were intended to encourage mutual respect to promote unity between Jewish and Gentile Christians.

The Jerusalem church recorded the decision of the council in a letter and sent it to the Gentile believers through Judas, also called Barsabbas, and Silas. The Gentile believers who received the decision were glad for its encouraging message. A legalistic message burdens and oppresses believers, while a message of grace brings joy.

Through the story of the Jerusalem Council, we learn the following three important lessons.

***First, we are saved only through the grace of our Lord Jesus.*** Salvation through grace is the essential truth of the Gospel that we must uphold. The Reformation initiated by Luther in the 16th century was defined by five solas: ***Sola Scriptura*** (Scripture alone), ***Solus Christus*** (Christ alone), ***Sola Fide*** (Faith alone), ***Sola Gratia*** (Grace alone), and ***Soli Deo gloria*** (Glory to God alone). These five doctrines laid the foundation for the Protestant Church in opposition to the corrupt Roman Catholic Church of that time. ***Sola Gratia*** means that ***“if the work of Christ is the basis of our right standing before God, and if we are justified by God not on the basis of our works but only through faith in the works of His Son, then it follows that our salvation is by grace and by grace alone.”*** ***Sola Gratia*** is a truth that applies not only to justification but from the very beginning to the end of our salvation. By God’s grace alone, we were chosen, brought to Jesus Christ, believed in Him, and were moved from death to life. By the grace of Jesus Christ alone, we will complete our salvation and enter into the eternal rest of God's kingdom.

Then, why did God give us the law? The Apostle Paul says in Galatians 3:24 that ***”the law was our guardian until Christ came that we might be justified by faith.”*** The law is a guardian that helps us recognize our sins, leads us to believe in Jesus and receive salvation by grace. Therefore, the law is beneficial to us and provides a standard for how we should live as God's people. However, we can never fully keep all the laws, and we cannot achieve salvation through the law. In human history, the only one who perfectly kept these laws was Jesus. Because Jesus fulfilled the demands of the law and was crucified for us, we can receive salvation not through the law, but by grace. Therefore, we must be cautious of doctrines that add anything other than grace as a condition for salvation. There are groups that say you must be baptized with water to be saved. Others claim that you must take communion to be saved, or that you must evangelize to be saved. We also encourage and practice water baptism, communion, and evangelism, but these are not conditions for our salvation. We are saved by the grace of Jesus Christ alone.

***Second, we need to have an open heart to share the gospel with people from different cultures.*** The Jerusalem church did not require the Gentiles to observe circumcision and the Law of Moses to uphold the essential value of the gospel, which is salvation through the grace of Jesus Christ alone. For some Jewish believers, circumcision and the Law of Moses might have been essential. But through the word of God and the work of the Holy Spirit they realized that the grace of Jesus was essential for salvation, while the law of Moses was non-essential. To preserve the gospel truth, salvation through grace, they boldly conceded their values regarding the Law. This must have been very difficult for them. However, they adopted a flexible attitude and changed themselves in order to share the Gospel with the Gentiles.

When we preach the gospel in a cross-cultural context, it is crucial to have an open heart, learn and adapt to the culture of the mission field. Pastor Tim Keller emphasizes the importance of sound contextualization. Sound contextualization means translating and adapting the communication and ministry of the gospel to a particular culture without compromising the essence and particulars of the gospel itself. The great missionary task is to express the gospel message to a new culture in a way that avoids making the message unnecessarily alien to that culture. For this, we need to take the time to learn and understand the culture of the people in the mission field. We must also wisely discern what is essential and what is non-essential. This principle applies to campus ministry as well. Understanding the culture of the younger generation will enable us to share the Gospel in a way that resonates with them. We are praying for our church to become a multi-ethnic and multicultural congregation, as New York, where we live, is a multi-ethnic and multi-cultural city. To become a truly multicultural congregation, we must start by respecting and humbly learning from people of different cultures. When we open our hearts and adopt a humble attitude of learning before judging other cultures, we can effectively share the Gospel with them.

***Third, we must pray together, engage in dialogue, and follow the guidance of the Holy Spirit based on the word of God for the unity of the church.*** The apostles and elders of the Jerusalem church had much discussion about the serious issue that could have broken the unity of the church. They did not engage in arguments for the sake of arguing but rather sought to discern God's will through their discussions. Some people use arguments to persuade others to accept their own opinions. However, the true purpose of a discussion is to listen to various perspectives, evaluate one's own views, and be willing to change one's mind to reach the right conclusion. Some people become enemies after a debate. It seems we need a more mature culture of discussion. The important point is that the members of the church seek God's will together. Once God’s will is discovered, everyone should unite with one heart to work together in fulfilling God's purpose. I pray that we become a mature church that discovers and follows God's guidance together.