

“The Fallen Tabernacle Rebuilt”  
(Acts 15:13-21)

I. Introduction.

A. Orientation.

1. We can't over emphasize the importance of what was going on at this Council in Jerusalem.

a. The Gospel was at stake.

- (i) The grace God had planned in eternity towards His elect.
- (ii) The work Jesus Christ had come in time to perform.
- (iii) The application of it to Christ's sheep by the Holy Spirit.
- (iv) God will only work through the truth: it had to be preserved.

b. Ultimately, His glory was at stake:

- (i) When we add works – any of our works – we take away from His glory.
- (ii) We actually destroy the grace of God – grace, by definition, is free – it cannot be earned, it cannot be bought, it must be given freely.
- (iii) How dishonoring this view was to God, who deserves all the credit, since He has done it all.

c. Our salvation was riding on this as well.

- (i) This is the message that eventually would reach us.
- (ii) If it had polluted by works – if it had been destroyed – we would have stood in need of a Reformation.
- (iii) This is exactly what happened to it after this Council – eventually Rome would bury the grace of God in human works, and the Lord would later need to dig it out by the hands of Martin Luther and the other Reformers.
- (iv) Thankfully, the Lord did not allow it to be hidden at this crucial point in the history of His church.

2. But something else is riding on this issue as well, something we'll see come up again in chapter 21.

a. It's true that circumcision and the Ceremonial Law were not necessary for salvation, but were they permitted at all?

- (i) Timothy's example shows us that circumcision could be done without sinning (Acts 16:3).
- (ii) But what about the rest of the Mosaic Law and the traditions? Could they be kept, if not relied on for salvation?

b. One thing we need to consider is that we're at the dividing line between the dissolving of the Old Covenant system and the establishing of the New:

- (i) There is overlap here: the Lord is giving them time to sort out the changes, as well as gather in the elect.

- (ii) The Temple would stand for another forty years after Jesus died and put an end to it.
- (iii) During that time, the Jews would still be worshiping God through it.
- (iv) To some extent, perhaps even the converted Jews would do so.
- (v) This would then create another area of sensitivity that the Gentile Christians needed to be aware of, as we'll see this morning.

## B. Preview.

### 1. Review:

- a. Having had the question arise in Antioch of whether Gentiles needed to be circumcised and obey the Ceremonial Law, and
- b. Having argued the point there, and, not fully settling it, having taken the issue to Jerusalem, and
- c. Having debated the issue with the Judaizers, and having received testimony from Peter, Paul and Barnabas,

### 2. Preview:

- a. James now proceeds to make an argument from the Old Testament prophecies regarding the coming of the Messiah and the changes He would make.
- b. He then draws the meeting to a conclusion, adding a few things for the Gentiles to observe that they might not offend the Jews.
- c. This is what we'll consider this morning.

## II. Sermon.

### A. First, let's consider James' argument as to why the Gentiles should not be circumcised and observe the Ceremonial Law.

#### 1. First, the biblical argument he adds to the discussion.

- a. After Peter gave his argument (God's testimony of the Spirit) and Paul and Barnabas finished their testimony (signs and wonders to verify their message), James, the brother of the Lord, addressed the assembly (v. 13).
- b. He first appealed to Peter's previous testimony (v. 14):
  - (i) Simeon is the Aramaic form of Simon: Perhaps James wanted to show a closer affinity with the Jewish Christians.
  - (ii) Peter had shown how the Lord had called some of the Gentiles and granted the gift of His Spirit through the preaching of the Gospel, by grace through simple faith alone, and not through circumcision and the Ceremonial Law.
- c. Then, he adds a new argument: this is what God said would happen when Jesus came (v. 15).
  - (i) He quotes Amos 9:11-12: "After these things I will return, and I will rebuild the tabernacle of David which has fallen, and I will rebuild its ruins, and I will restore it, so that the rest of mankind may seek the Lord, and all the Gentiles who are called by My name," says the Lord, who makes these things known from long ago" (vv. 16-18).

- (a) It's always good when what we believe is in agreement with Scripture.
  - (b) If it isn't, we should always stand ready to be corrected.
- (ii) Now how did this bear on the argument? Let's consider this:
- (a) "After these things":
    - (1) After the warnings God gave regarding the sins of the Southern Kingdom of Judah, their lack of repentance and the coming exile.
    - (2) James is not, as Dispensationalists believe, referring to something that would happen after that Council was over, in the distant future.
    - (3) James was talking about what was going on then.
  - (b) "I will return":
    - (1) The Lord was intending to return in His mercy to fulfill His promises made to His covenant people.
    - (2) Not for their faithfulness – they had not been faithful – but because of His faithfulness and purposes which will not be turned aside.
  - (c) "And I will rebuild the tabernacle of David which has fallen, and I will rebuild its ruins, and I will restore it":
    - (1) Referring to David's house, the kingly line.
    - (2) The Lord had promised that David would never lack a man on the throne if his sons would walk in His ways (1 Kings 2:3-4).
    - (3) But they failed, they disobeyed, so the Lord tore down the throne of David and took the people into exile.
    - (4) The throne of David was not restored from the time it was taken away until Christ.
    - (5) But Christ is the Son of David to whom the promises were made. The Lord raised Him up, not because of David's faithfulness or that of his sons, but because of His own faithfulness.
    - (6) Jesus has been raised up as King over all the earth: literally from heaven. His is not a political kingdom, but a spiritual kingdom which is influencing the earth and one day will greatly do so.
  - (d) Because He has been raised up, the following is true, "'So that the rest of mankind may seek the Lord, and all the Gentiles who are called by My name,' says the Lord, who makes these things known from long ago":
    - (1) Salvation was from the Jews: promised to Abraham's children and within his family for several hundred years. To be saved, a Gentile would need to become a proselyte to Judaism.
    - (2) But after the Lord restored the line of David in Jesus, after Jesus went and preached to the Jews, after He was rejected, crucified and raised from the death, He sent His Spirit upon His disciples to take the message of the Gospel again to the Jews, then the Samaritans, then to the God-fearing Gentiles, then to the Gentiles of the nations.

- (3) Now that the fallen house of David has been restored in Jesus, Jesus has given the command to take that Gospel to every living creature, that the Gentiles/nations may seek Him, and by His grace find Him.
- (4) This is what the Lord had purposed, this is what He predicted, this is what He has brought about.
- (5) “All the ends of the earth will remember and turn to the LORD, and all the families of the nations will worship before You” (Psalm 22:27).

(e) And so we not only have the testimony of the Spirit’s being poured out on the Gentiles and the signs and wonders that attest to the fact that this is God’s truth, we also have the testimony of Scripture – God’s Word, in which He told us that this is exactly what He was going to do.

2. From this, James draws his conclusion: “Therefore it is my judgment that we do not trouble those who are turning to God from among the Gentiles” (v. 19).

- a. We are not to assume that this was merely James’ opinion, but that he spoke as the head of this assembly, summarizing what these arguments prove, with the possibility of challenge, which doesn’t come.
- b. His conclusion is that they don’t trouble those who are turning to God from among the Gentiles:
  - (i) That they don’t require them to be circumcised and observe the Ceremonial Law.
  - (ii) That they don’t lay on the “neck of the disciples a yoke which neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear” (v. 10).
  - (iii) This conclusion upholds justification by God’s free grace, received through faith alone.

B. Second, let’s look at the considerations James believes are necessary to promote a wider door of opportunity for the Gospel.

1. They shouldn’t place this yoke on the necks of the disciples, but:

- a. It would be helpful if they would abstain from a few things that would be particularly obnoxious to the Jews: “From things contaminated by idols and from fornication and from what is strangled and from blood” (v. 20).
- b. What does James mean? Things basically ceremonial in nature.
  - (i) “Things contaminated by idols”: not idolatry itself – they knew this already and were required by the moral law to abstain. But things contaminated by idols – things offered to idols, things coming from the idol meat-market, not because it was sinful, but because it was offensive – would further make Christianity a reproach to the Jews – and could possibly stumble a weaker brother (1 Cor. 10).
  - (ii) “Fornication”: sexual immorality – this is already forbidden by the moral law – could be referring to uncleanness such as that associated again with idolatry (see *Theonomy in Christian Ethics*).

- (iii) “From what is strangled”: from eating meat that wasn’t bled properly, so that they don’t eat meat with the blood in it.
  - (iv) “And from blood”: eating blood was strictly forbidden by the Ceremonial Law: “You are not to eat any blood, either of bird or animal, in any of your dwellings. Any person who eats any blood, even that person shall be cut off from his people” (Lev. 7:26-27).
  - (v) This was also forbidden to Noah and his family prior to the ceremonial law. Generally, we consider laws of this nature to be continually binding: “Every moving thing that is alive shall be food for you; I give all to you, as *I gave* the green plant. Only you shall not eat flesh with its life, *that is*, its blood” (Gen. 9:3-4). Although its inclusion in this list may mean that it’s a matter of indifference.
2. Why should they do this? “For Moses from ancient generations has in every city those who preach him, since he is read in the synagogues every Sabbath” (v. 21).
- a. The reason they were to observe these things was because of the Jews living in every city, who have the Law of Moses expounded to them in the synagogues on every Sabbath, who are constantly reminded that these things are forbidden.
  - b. If they continued to indulge in this behavior, they would be putting an unnecessary stumbling block before them.
  - c. Some believe that James is speaking about not stumbling or offending converted brethren here, seeking to promote greater unity in the church.
  - d. In this case, it teaches us to be considerate to other brethren, not using our knowledge to tear them down, but build them up.
  - e. In the first case, it reminds us that we need to become all things to all men, so that we might win some.
  - f. In all things, let’s be encouraged to be those who build up with our freedom and truth, not those who tear down God’s work. Amen.