

36a ACTS

Let's begin our study of the Word of God this evening with a word of prayer. This is the 16th of April, 2004, and we are going to begin the 15th chapter of Acts tonight. But we pause at the outset to make sure we are availing ourselves of the grace of God in the presence and person of the Holy Spirit, and that God will bless our study.

Shall we pray? Father, thank you for the gift of your Word and the presence of your Spirit. We are so grateful that you have not called us to a holy life and to a productive life without also giving us the means of accomplishing it. We are grateful for the resources of the soul and for the perspective and the objectivity that comes from understanding the present and the future in the light of your plan.

We pray that the Holy Spirit will find our hearts receptive and will impress the truth upon us so that we can live in a way that is pleasing in your sight. We pray it in Jesus' name. Amen.

Last time we saw the concluding section of the first missionary journey, Paul and Barnabas, having gone from Antioch of Syria due west, more or less, and then north up into Pisidia and the regions thereabouts, Pamphylia, and to Iconium, Lystra, Derbe, and so on. Then returning pretty much by the same route that they began, and have now returned to Antioch in Syria in verse 26 of chapter 14 of Acts where they had been commended to the grace of God for the work which they had completed. And the word here translated, commended, we have looked at.

This is *paradidomi*, which *para* means alongside, like parallel, and *didomi* is the word that means to give. And the idea here is to yield up, to entrust, to transmit. It's even used of putting people in prison, to give over, to even betray or cast.

It's sometimes in the context translated that way. But this is the church that basically had commissioned them and sent them forth. Now, why do we care about this? Why am I even making the point? Because initially, where did people issue forth to go do ministry? What was their locus or their base of operations? Jerusalem is where Philip went out from, right? Jerusalem is where Peter went out from, and John up to Samaria and back.

But in this case, the commission for Paul and Barnabas doesn't come from Jerusalem. It comes from Antioch. And this has sort of unknowingly or inadvertently sowed the seeds of some dissension because the people back in Jerusalem are liable to feel like they're kind of losing control.

They're losing importance. They're no longer the brain center and the big Jesus that everybody gets their marching orders from. Now, this church in Antioch is kind of sending forth its own mission teams.

And so when word of this gets back to Jerusalem, you can imagine, just human nature being what it is, the people say, well, we didn't give any authorization for this trip. Who's authorizing all of this? So they came together. They gathered the church.

They reported all that God had done with them. He had opened the door of faith to the Gentiles. They stayed there a long time with the disciples.

Now, we had some discussion both during and after class last time about the chronology of the life of Paul and where does this fit in. And I mentioned that this period of time, this long time of verse 28, was on the order of four or five years. And a lot of what Paul describes in Corinthians in terms of his travails and sufferings took place during this time.

Let me give you just a rehearsal of what Paul has done up to this point in terms of year numbers. Paul Barnabas and John Mark set out from Antioch back in Acts chapter 13 verse 4. This was circa 44 AD, 44, 45, somewhere in there. And obviously when they come back and then stay in Antioch a long time, we know that the events where they go down to Jerusalem begin in 50, 51 AD.

So that space of time is what is covered by verse 28. Well, they are going to determine the date of the Jerusalem Council by looking at some history. We know that Felix was procurator in Judea in 60 AD.

We start by counting backwards. Portius Festus succeeds him in 60 AD. So you start there and basically work backwards.

And so in 50 AD or thereabouts, Paul and Barnabas go to the council in Jerusalem. And from Galatians chapter 2 verses 1-9, which we've looked at in the past, let's just look at that quickly again. Galatians 2, Paul says, After 14 years I went up again to Jerusalem with Barnabas and took Titus with me.

This is where we are in Acts chapter 15. He's going to Jerusalem. He says, After 14 years.

Well, what preceded that? It's what he says at the end of chapter 1. He says, After visiting Jerusalem, afterward I went into the regions of Syria and Silesia, and I was unknown by faith to the churches of Judea, which were in Christ. So, there's a 14 year space there. We also know this from the second verse of Acts 15.

So now, Paul and Barnabas are going to go down, probably in the winter of say 50 or 51 AD, they go down to Jerusalem and then they're going to return to Antioch. So, this is where we are in the succession, in the chronology of things. If you want to know where to place Galatians chapter 2 verse 1, I went up again to Jerusalem with Barnabas and took Titus with me.

This is the point of correspondence. We're there in Acts chapter 15. And we'll continue to

fill in this sort of independent chronology of Paul's life as we go through Acts.

And we'll eventually note the writing of his various epistles and so on all the way up until we get to the end of Acts. But this is where we are now. So, Acts chapter 15 verse 1. Certain men came down from Judea and taught the brethren.

Of course, you always come down from Jerusalem, down from Judea. Unless you're circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved. Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and dispute with them.

They determined that Paul and Barnabas and certain others of them, this includes Titus, should go up to Jerusalem to the apostles and elders about this question. These individuals are sponsored by and are part of the Pharisaic converts in Jerusalem. These people are from the Pharisees.

Being sent on their way by the church, they pass through Phoenicia, Samaria, describing the conversion of the Gentiles, the great joy of all the brethren. We saw that last time. When they'd come to Jerusalem, they were received by the church and the apostles and elders.

They reported all things God had done with them. But some of the sect of the Pharisees who believed, rose up saying it is necessary to circumcise them and to command them to keep the law of Moses. So, this basically can be traced to the born-again Pharisees, if you will.

Now, what do we think about this? Why do we care about this? Think about it. What is a Pharisee? How did the Pharisees arise in Jerusalem anyway? The very word Pharisee, the term, the name of that particular sect in Judaism, means to separate, to come out from among them and be ye separate is the idea. And the Pharisees said, you know, Israel is basically going to Gehenna in a handbasket, so we are going to return to the old ways.

We're going to live by the law. And this is what they did. And they said, we are separate and distinct from you sloppy, inefficient, disobedient, apathetic people.

We have come out and are separate and we are adhering to the law. And they developed the traditions that accreted on the law of Moses. And you can recall, for example, the scripture back in Isaiah, where God spoke to Israel and warned them about this.

In Isaiah chapter 29, verse 13, the Lord said, But inasmuch as these people draw near with their mouths and honor me with their lips, but have removed their hearts far from me. Now this is a scary thing. Everything looks good.

Everything sounds good. You're drawing near to God, but it's verbal. Draw near with their mouths, honor me with their lips, but have removed their hearts far from me, and their fear toward me is taught by the commandment of men.

The honor and the respect that are given to God is brought about by the commandment of men. What does that mean? Well, think about a, we'll try to leave denominations out of it. Just assume that there's some church somewhere and people say, Okay, we're going to pray now.

Everybody kneel. Some churches even have kneelers that, if you've ever seen the pews, they fold out and they have little cushioned things, and so you can get down on this cushioned heel and you can kneel. Well, you can ask everyone to kneel.

You can ask everyone to stand and bow their head and close their eyes, but it doesn't mean anything that everyone is kneeling or everyone is bowing their head and closing their eyes, does it? In God's eyes, he's looking at those who are praying from the heart, who are coming to him with a true heart, in full assurance of faith, heart having been sprinkled from an evil conscience, body having been washed with pure water, as it says over in Hebrews 10. Man looks on the outward appearance, the Lord looks on the heart. So if your fear of God is an outward show, this kind of reminds me of the love for your fellow Christian, where they say, okay, as a programmed part of the service, they stop and say, now everybody turn around and greet your neighbor, and shake hands with the person beside you or behind you or whatever.

I mean, it's just a little bit unnatural. It's a little bit forced. We say, okay, well, it's 10.17. Everybody turn around and shake hands with the person next to you.

I mean, it just doesn't have the same sort of spontaneous and natural motivation that comes if you see someone that you know in the parking lot or you see someone between services. Somebody says, okay, now is the time to meet and greet. All right, it's been a minute and 45 seconds.

Everybody stop. Well, this is what God is talking about. Their fear toward me is taught by the commandment of men.

This can extend to rituals. Well, if I just do step A, step B, and step C, God will be happy. And I don't care what your tradition is.

I don't care what your background is or how you practice your Christianity. Whatever you do can become sort of an empty form if your heart's not in it. You can be going to a strong teaching Bible church, as I have done and many of us have done in years past, and your very attendance can become sort of a legalism, sort of a thing where you check that off and you say, well, I went to class every time the doors were open this week.

Or if you're not around a church and you listen to a tape, and you say, well, I'm going to listen to a tape a day. And so you turn the thing on and you listen to it. It's over with.

You shut your book. Okay, my spiritual life is squared away. I have heard my tape.

Anything we do can become a commandment taught by men and become sort of a ritual. The only person who can make sure that our practice and our worship and our faith is not an empty ritual is us. We are the ones that can convert ritual to reality.

We take the form and give it substance. Think about, here's an innocuous example that I've thought about many, many times. You think about the Pledge of Allegiance.

When I was little in grade school, every morning we came in and put our hand over our heart. Remember the flag monitor? Somebody would get to go up and hold the flag. It's kind of a demeaning thing when you think about it.

You're just a flag holder. But you go up and different ones would hold the flag, and then everybody else would say the Pledge of Allegiance. For a long time, I had no idea what allegiance was.

I didn't know what a pledge was. I didn't know what a republic was. I had no concept of what the words meant.

But we stood up and put our hand over our heart and said these words. And I think adults never really thought about the fact that we didn't know what the heck we were saying. We could have been saying the recipe for chocolate chip cookies and it would have been just as meaningful.

And then as time went on, I began to think about the words. I pledge. I promise.

Allegiance. Loyalty. Why don't they just put it in plain English? I promise loyalty to the flag of the United States.

And I promise loyalty to the republic that the flag stands for. It's a single nation under God. It can't be divided.

And its goal is freedom and fairness for everyone. You can put it in plain English and it has a lot more meaning. But we ourselves as citizens of the United States have to think about the pledge and have to say, am I really promising? How many people say the pledge and they turn right around and do all kinds of horrible things in the country? So this is what God is talking about.

Inasmuch as these people draw near with their mouths, honor me with their lips, but they have removed their hearts far from me. Notice, when God saves us, our heart is near. We take our heart and pick it up and carry it away.

They have removed their hearts far from me. This is volitional. This is responsibility.

This is us consciously going some direction. And their fear toward me is taught by the commandment of men. Look at the result in verse 14.

Therefore, behold, God says, I will again do a marvelous work among this people. When he says again, what was the first marvelous work among the people? Reaching into Egypt, delivering them out of bondage, giving them nationhood and their own land and a spiritual identity, a worship system, God for their king and so on. It was a marvelous work.

He says, I'm going to do another marvelous work. For the wisdom of the wise men shall perish. The understanding of their prudent men shall be hidden.

And you can go on and read the rest of that chapter. But he says, the reason I'm going to do this astonishing work of discipline on Israel is because they're just giving me lip service. It's a show.

It's a sham. It doesn't have substance. It's just form.

Well, this is what the Pharisees were experts in. And they took pride in it. They had taken what God initially gave Israel and turned it into kind of a thing of their own.

They were the experts on the tradition. They could tell you how many times you were allowed to brush your robe before you were doing work on the Sabbath or exactly how many steps you could take. And all of these little fine points, which of the things in your house should you tithe.

And they had this whole system going. And because they were Pharisees and they were the separate ones, this was sort of their badge of honor. This was their identity.

Many times you see people who have taken something and said, this is what defines me. Some people will just get tattoos all over. Some people will, in Texas especially, having never seen a ranch, having never laid eyes on a cow, will wear a cowboy hat, will wear cowboy boots, will put an empty rifle rack in the back of their pickup and do a lot of things and listen to country western music and go to country western bars and just sort of pick up an identity.

And it just seems that they need something to define them. That I need sort of a hook to hang myself on and it's country western or it's tattoos and piercings or it's whatever it may be. I mean, you could be a member of the Garden and Petunia Society and you're all about flowers.

There's something that you just hook into and say, this is the definition of me. I build telescopes and look at the moon or I fly model planes. People will take something and that is the defining first thing you think of when you think of that person.

Dog lover, chocolate lover, gourmet cook. I mean, I'm not trying to pick on any one particular thing and there's nothing wrong with having one or more great hobbies, but the Pharisees, how they define themselves and how they justify themselves and how

they decide that they have worth and merit and meaning in life is their Phariseeism. And Phariseeism is all about the traditions.

So think about this now. I hope we've got this picture clearly in mind. Here come Paul and Barnabas preaching a gospel ostensibly from the God of Israel that says, all that tradition stuff, forget it.

Culminating and summed up in circumcision. But basically if you throw out circumcision, the traditions are gone. If you're not circumcised, you haven't even walked through the door of the traditions.

You haven't walked through the door of the rituals because that's the first and biggest one. And from that all others stem, flow and follow. So if you obviate and make unnecessary the rituals, this is like saying, well, in Texas we're outlawing cowboy hats.

We're outlawing pickup trucks. Well, a lot of people wouldn't know who they were anymore if they had no truck and no hat. What will I be? What will I do? I'm lost.

That's my identity. That's my world. That's my reason for being.

Well, this is what the Christianity preached by Paul and Barnabas is doing to the Pharisees. So you can sort of get an insight into why they not only fret in Jerusalem, but send men to Antioch and suggest that these guys come back and they say, look, if we drop the Judaism out of Christianity, where are we going to be? Being a Pharisee is going to be meaningless. My daddy was a Pharisee.

My grandpa was a Pharisee. I've come from a 400 year long line of Pharisees and you're throwing our stuff out the window. So, I mean, it's a big deal to them.

That's why there was no small dissension and dispute. Well, it's not necessarily Phariseeism today, but what do we have? We have denominationalism. I come from a great long foggy line of Baptists going back into the obscure past.

Some of us come from different lines like Catholicism, have a family that goes back into the roots of Catholicism for generations. Or it may be some other thing. You can just find yourself a part of a particular sort of defining element in your life, whatever it may be.

Some people are in a family business sort of a thing where, well, my daddy was a... We've been brewing beer for 200 years, you know, and it's been in the family. You get down and you say, well, my Christianity, I may or may not want to keep on brewing beer or I may not want to be a board member of the cigarette company or any other thing where maybe it's assumed, it's expected, it's something that is a part of your environment and yet your Christianity brings you into some sort of conflict. And maybe it's saying this is not something you should continue or that you should be a part of.

Maybe you need to separate out of something related to family, something related to business, something that maybe is really important to us and is kind of defining. So what do we do? Well, what happened in the church? They got together in Jerusalem. They were received by the church.

And the first thing they did, they reported all the things that God had done with them. You get the idea that they came into Jerusalem and there was some amount of fanfare. People had heard rumors and heard second- and third-hand stories.

And so the first thing they did is they stood up like you would on a Sunday morning when your missionary comes back. And he stands up in the pulpit and he says, let me tell you what all we're doing in Peru. And he shows his slides and shows you the little flutes and things they bring back, the little artifacts.

And the whole church gets a big presentation. Well, then afterward, all those people go home and then the leadership of the church gets together and say, all right, now let's talk about financing. Let's talk about the nitty-gritty.

Are you going to go back and then get down to business? This is sort of what happened here. The General Assembly came together, got the big news, and they reported everything God had done. But the Pharisees rise up and saying, what, you mean you didn't have these converts circumcised? So then they say, well, look, after everybody goes home, let's have a little conclave.

So in verse 6, the apostles and elders came together to consider the matter. They didn't want to just air all of this out in front of the whole congregation. So the apostles and elders had a business meeting, had a board meeting.

And there was much dispute. So Peter rose up and said, men and brethren, you know that a good while ago God chose among us that by my mouth the Gentiles should hear the word of the gospel and believe. Remember, we covered this back in Acts 11, where Peter came and gave that report.

The apostles and brethren, this is 11-1, in Judea heard that the Gentiles had received the word of God. Peter came up to Jerusalem. Those of the circumcision contended with him, saying, you uncircumcised men, and ate with them.

Peter explained it to them in order from the beginning, saying, and then he talks about the sheep. And he tells that story just as we saw it in the previous chapter, rise, Peter, kill, and eat. So, if therefore, verse 17, God gave them the same gift as he gave us when we believed on the Lord Jesus, who was I that I could withstand God? Verse 18, when they heard these things, they became silent.

They glorified God, saying, then God has also granted to the Gentiles repentance with a view toward life. So, this is not a new idea. It isn't that the Gentiles can believe, but what

should they do after they believe? So, you can see the Pharisees kind of trying to get some traction here.

They lost the first battle that the Gentiles could come in at all. So, now they're going to say, well, we basically want them to be proselytes, and then we'll be happy. So, Peter has to stand up and he says, you know, a good while ago, God chose among us.

By my mouth, the Gentiles should hear the word of the gospel and believe. So, God, who knows the heart, acknowledged them by giving them the Holy Spirit, just as he did to us. He's basically saying, remember chapter 11? He made no distinction between us and them, purifying their hearts by faith.

Now, therefore, why do you test God by putting a yoke on the neck of the disciples, which neither our fathers nor we were able to bear? But we believe that through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, we shall be saved in the same manner as they. Now, do you notice, even in the English here in verse 11, the tense of the verb, to be saved. It says, we shall be saved, which sounds like a future.

This is an aorist passive infinitive. And it says, but through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, we are believing to be saved, according to the same manner. So, you're getting a little bit of interpretive translating here.

I'm giving you straight out of the Greek here in verse 11. But, through the grace of the Lord Jesus, pistou amen, which is the first person plural, we, present active indicative, we are believing. Then you have the aorist passive infinitive.

The infinitive is to do something. This is to save, except it's in the passive, so it's to be saved. We are believing to be saved, in the same manner as they.

This is kata, according to, and you have the same manner. We are believing. What's going on here? Remember, and this is one of the things that I apologize for keeping on bringing up, but I feel like we're kind of swimming against the tide of tradition.

But most of the time in the New Testament, when you see the word saved, it's not talking about damnation salvation. It's talking about the salvation of, was it Galatians chapter 1, where it says Christ died to deliver us out of this present evil age. Galatians 1.4 gave himself for our sins that he might deliver us from this present evil age according to the will of our God and Father.

And Peter doesn't say we believed with an aorist, which would be a point in time, sort of a summation that faith accomplished our regeneration and so on. He says we are believing. But notice how the translators here have separated believing and being saved clear at opposite ends of the sentence.

Where in Greek, they're right next to each other. You have, Pistuamen sotheni, which is

from sozo. Pistuo and sozo are side by side in the Greek sentence, but they stuck we believe all the way up in the front of the sentence.

But through the grace of the Lord Jesus, we are believing to be saved in the same manner as they. We are believing to be delivered. This is about daily righteousness.

This is about daily deliverance. This is about daily redeeming of the time. This is spirituality, righteousness by faith.

And Peter uses the word sozo. This is deliverance, being delivered out of darkness, delivered out of uselessness, delivered out of fruitlessness. We are believing to be saved, just like they.

All the multitude kept silent after Peter stands up and speaks, as Barnabas and Paul declare how many miracles and wonders God worked through them among the Gentiles. And after they had become silent, James answered, saying, Men and brethren, listen to me. Simon has declared how God at the first visited the Gentiles to take out of them a people for His name.

And with this, the words of the prophets agree. Just as it is written, After this I will return and will rebuild the tabernacle of David which has fallen down. I will rebuild its ruins and I will set it up, so that the rest of mankind may seek the Lord.

Even all the Gentiles who are called by my name says the Lord who does all these things. Known to God from eternity are all His works. Therefore I, James, judge that we should not trouble those from among the Gentiles who are turning to God, but that we write to them to abstain from things polluted by idols, from sexual immorality, from things strangled, and from blood.

For Moses has had throughout many generations those who preach him in every city being read in the synagogues every Sabbath. So what is this all about? James starts well. He goes to the Old Testament and he says, Brethren, we should not lay the burden of the law of Moses on the Gentiles.

He does a good job of quoting the Old Testament Scripture that God is going to allow the Gentiles to seek the Lord, that there are Gentiles who are called by God's name. So he says, I judge we should not trouble those from among the Gentiles who are turning to God. If James had just stopped right there and shut up and sat down, everything would have been great.

Instead, he says, But let's write to them to abstain from things polluted by idols, abstain from sexual immorality, abstain from things strangled, and abstain from blood. This is a compromise to pacify the Pharisaic element. How do I know this? Well, first of all, there is a singular omission or omissions in this list.

Nothing is said about murder. Nothing is said about theft. These are individual elements of doing righteousness and not doing evil.

In terms of sexual immorality, sexual immorality, we're on solid ground. Thou shalt not commit adultery. But what about things polluted by idols? Is this a moral requirement or a ritual requirement? It's ritual.

Laying a piece of meat in front of a rock for an hour changes nothing. This is all in the area of ritual. How about things strangled? How do you know if something was strangled or not? What was the manner of its death? Well, this was a ritual requirement of the Mosaic Law that something strangled was unclean and defiled and not to be eaten.

It is a ritual impurity. If you go down to the butcher shop, they usually conk an animal in the head to kill it and start chopping it up right away. But if they strangled it to death and then chopped it up, you wouldn't know the difference.

This is a ritual requirement. There's no moral component to strangling the animal. Partaking of the blood.

This is a ritual requirement. The life of the flesh is in the blood. The blood has symbolic value in the ritual system of Israel.

Is it some sort of a sin if the English eat blood pudding? It's disgusting to me, but there's no moral component to eating the blood. As the scientists will tell you, blood is a tissue. It seems strange to me, but it is a ritual idea.

Right? So, what is James doing here? He's compromising. He's saying, we'll put a little bit of ritual requirement on them. He's going to pacify.

He's going to give in a little bit to the Pharisaic elements and say, well, look, we'll keep them from doing the worst ritual offenses, mainly having to do with foods. What does Paul say? Doubtful things in Corinth. Do you eat meat offered to idols or not? He says, let every man be convinced in his own mind.

He says, let no man judge you when it comes to foods. Right? That means, was the animal strangled or not? Let no man judge you. Is there still blood in the meat? Let no man judge you.

These are ritual requirements and James is wrong. James is wrong here. There should be no, and there is no, biblical... Because if James is right, then where is the support for this in the rest of the New Testament? Does Paul ever say this in any of his epistles? Oh, you Colossians, oh, you Galatians, oh, you Philipians, be sure you don't eat anything with blood.

Don't strangle your food. What does Paul say? We are free in Christ. Do not let your

freedom turn into license.

Do not harm your brother by your liberty. There is the law of love and the law of supreme sacrifice, the trump, the law of liberty. It doesn't say anything about strangulation.

It doesn't say anything about blood. It doesn't say anything about whether or not something is somehow associated with an idol. This is error.

And James, every time James pops up in the New Testament church, he causes problems. Well, we need to pause here and take our break, but keep in mind that compromise pollutes. Compromise causes problems.

And when we find these traditional elements or these historic elements in our own life, the analog to the Phariseeism of this day, compromising with it is just going to cause problems. Let's pause and take our break. We'll come back and continue this thought.