

## Sola Fide

### Միայն Հաւատքով

#### Acts 15:1-21

1978, Lebanon was in civil war. I was visiting my friend John Sagherian who was leading the Youth for Christ (YFC) choir in Beirut. I wanted to support this concert and went to Beirut to be with John. One day, after the rehearsal, I was in his car when a random checkpoint stopped us and asked for our ID cards. His ID was Lebanese, mine was Syrian, so I was not welcomed in that part of the city. They took me out of the car and asked my friend to leave. John disagreed. He said he would not leave me alone. They took both of us. We were ok later, but I was afraid in those moments. I will not forget that in danger I was not alone, my friend was next to me.

Last Sunday we covered chapter 14. We found out that Paul and Barnabas ended their first journey by going back to **Syrian Antioch**. Instead of using a short road, they took the same route on their way to Syrian Antioch. We found out that sharing the gospel was costly. The cities were divided, some came to faith, some rejected, and they became the opposition. They even stoned Paul and left him thinking he was dead. Yet the disciples came and gathered around Paul and took this wounded man to safe place. Nothing will stop God's work, Nothing.

Let us move to chapter 15. We think Jerusalem would be delighted hearing about this missionary journey. Thousands became Christians, many cities had new home churches. The gospel message was going around. Don't you think this is the best news one can hear?

**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." <sup>2</sup>This brought Paul and Barnabas into sharp dispute and debate with them. 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. <sup>3</sup>The church sent them on their way, and as they traveled through Phoenicia and Samaria, they told how the Gentiles had been converted. This news made all the believers very glad. <sup>4</sup>When they came to Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the church and the apostles and elders, to whom they reported everything God had done through them. (Acts 15:1-4 NIV11)**

There was a group of Pharisees (v5) who became Christians. They were not against the Gentiles becoming Christians, yet they demanded that the Gentile Christians followed all the Jewish laws, in order for their conversion to become complete.

**“Unless you are circumcised, according to the custom taught by Moses, you cannot be saved.”**

Circumcision was a sign of the covenant God made with His people.

That was a sign for certain people for a certain time.

Stott says: “They were telling Gentile converts that faith in Jesus was not enough, not sufficient for salvation: They must add to faith circumcision, and to circumcision observance of the law. In other words, they must let Moses complete what Jesus had begun, and let the laws supplement the gospel.”<sup>1</sup>

**This was a serious issue.** No wonder Paul and Barnabas had a sharp dispute with them.

Please notice, those men were not sent by Peter, or James, or the apostles. Luke says, a **certain group** who thought like this went to Syrian-Antioch to teach them how to become Christians.

Let me clarify some important facts.

“I have other sheep not from this flock,” Jesus said.

I emphasized that to you in my sermons that the gospel message is for every nation, starting from **“Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”** (Acts 1:8 NIV11)

**Let us review some facts from Acts:**

- Let us remember **Cornelius, the Roman centurion**, his conversion, not only his, his family; Peter saw a dream where God is sending him to the Gentile world (unclean vs clean). Jerusalem apostles endorsed this.

- How about the awakening in the **Syrian-Antioch city**, where unnamed missionaries spoke about Jesus to the Jews and Greeks (11:20): **“a great number believed,”** says Luke. The Jerusalem church sent **Barnabas** to check out the situation.

- How about the **Samaritans**? Although they are not gentile, but there were not considered **pure Jews**. We found out that they became Christians and were baptized and received Holy Spirit when **Peter and John** visited them and laid hands over them.

- How about the first missionary journey of Paul and Barnabas to Cyprus and Asia minor where we see many converts both Jews and Greeks. Luke says **God opened the door of faith to the Gentiles.** (14:27)

Paul and Barnabas were sent by their church of Antioch, to deal this question. Do we need to observe Jewish laws in order to be saved?

**<sup>6</sup>The apostles and elders met to consider this question. <sup>7</sup>After much discussion, Peter got up and addressed them:** (Acts 15:6,7a)

We are in Jerusalem. Paul and Barnabas have arrived from Syrian Antioch. There is a council, a meeting. Peter is not the main leader here. James, the brother of Jesus is.

Peter will speak.

Let me remind you that Paul and Peter had some disagreement in Syrian Antioch. There was a debate when this meeting happened. It was before the Jerusalem council?? I believe so, because as you will see how Peter's speech was very important in this hot question.

Let me quote you from the letter of Galatians:

**“When Cephas (Peter) came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he stood condemned. <sup>12</sup>For before certain men came from James, he used to eat with the Gentiles. But when they arrived, he began to draw back and separate himself from the Gentiles because he was afraid of those who belonged to the circumcision group. <sup>13</sup>The other Jews joined him in his hypocrisy, so that by their hypocrisy even Barnabas was led astray. <sup>14</sup>When I saw that they were not acting in line with the truth of the gospel, I said to Cephas in front of them all, “You are a Jew, yet you live like a Gentile and not like a Jew. How is it, then, that you force Gentiles to follow Jewish customs? (Galatians 2:11-14 NIV11)**

We are not sure when this event occurred: Peter going to Syrian Antioch. He was having fellowship with Gentiles, when James sent group of men who said something to Peter and Barnabas. That made Peter to withdraw back and separate himself from the Gentiles. Not only he, other Jews as well and Barnabas. Something happened. We don't have details. Yet Paul rebukes Peter publicly about his hypocrisy.

-Watch out here please.

-Paul spoke publicly, because Peter acted publicly.

-Paul's rebuke is not his personal opinion (personal revenge); he is defending the Biblical view.

**We read: "When I (Paul) saw that they (Peter and his friends) were not acting in line with the truth of the gospel, I said to Cephas in front of them all, "You are a Jew, yet you live like a Gentile and not like a Jew. How is it, then, that you force Gentiles to follow Jewish customs?"**

I ask myself, I don't know if this event (Galatians) happened before Acts 15 or after. I think it was before, and I see here **Peter** in the **council of Jerusalem** defending what Paul was teaching. (the gospel teaching)

Let us go to Acts 15

**"Brothers, you know that some time ago God made a choice among you that the Gentiles might hear from my lips the message of the gospel and believe. <sup>8</sup> God, who knows the heart, showed that he accepted them by giving the Holy Spirit to them, just as he did to us. <sup>9</sup> He did not discriminate between us and them, for he purified their hearts by faith. <sup>10</sup> Now then, 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? <sup>11</sup> No! We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved, just as they are."** (Acts 15:7-11 NIV11)

I see here Peter defending what Paul was preaching.

1. God granted me a choice to preach the gospel to the Gentiles
2. God seeks the heart of the people, and he grants the Holy Spirit; this means God accepts them. In Chapter 10, Peter said that God accepts from every nation.
3. God did not discriminate between Jews and gentiles.
4. God purifies the heart by FAITH.

If we have faith, believe in Jesus we are freed from the wrath of God.

"Jesus came and submitted to the law at every point, thereby living a life of perfect obedience for all who put their trust in him, and when He did, He won the blessing for all who identify with Him, and He did, took their curse upon himself by going to the cross. The full measure of God's curse was poured out upon Jesus, and then came the gospel: if you put your trust in Jesus, the righteousness He gained by obeying the law is yours, and the curse that belongs on your head is His—a double exchange." <sup>2</sup>

Only by faith we enter to this New Covenant with God. Sola Fide  
Any other requirement we add on this, we are saying that the sacrifice of Jesus,  
the blood of Jesus, the atonement of Jesus is not enough.

Next, we find that the council is silent:

**<sup>12</sup>The whole assembly became silent as they listened to Barnabas and Paul telling about the signs and wonders God had done among the Gentiles through them. (Acts 15:12 NIV11)**

I don't know the stories that they told, I am sure they shared how God was transforming the lives of both Gentiles and Jews.

There is a positive atmosphere here. Not only Peter spoke, then James, the head of council, spoke. This is James, the brother of Jesus, who also wrote the book of the James in the Bible. This is the man who had the nickname Old Camel knees, the man of prayer. He said:

**“Brothers,” he said, “listen to me. <sup>14</sup>Simon has described to us how God first intervened to choose a people for his name from the Gentiles. <sup>15</sup>The words of the prophets are in agreement with this, as it is written:**

**<sup>16</sup>“After this I will return  
and rebuild David’s fallen tent.**

**Its ruins I will rebuild,  
and I will restore it,**

**<sup>17</sup>that the rest of mankind may seek the Lord,  
even all the Gentiles who bear my name,  
says the Lord, who does these things’—**

**<sup>18</sup> things known from long ago.**

**<sup>19</sup>“It is my judgment, therefore, that we should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God. <sup>20</sup>Instead we should write to them, telling them to abstain from food polluted by idols, from sexual immorality, from the meat of strangled animals and from blood. <sup>21</sup>For the law of Moses has been preached in every city from the earliest times and is read in the synagogues on every Sabbath.” (Acts 15:13b-21 NIV11)**

We see here James endorses Peter's words, calling him Simon.

Then he quotes from Prophet Amos about God's message to the rest of mankind and all the Gentiles.

As a result of the Council, they wrote a letter to the church of the Gentiles accepting them in the church without becoming Jews first.

They asked them to stay away from two kinds of things:

1. from sexual immorality,
2. from meat that was sacrificed to idols.

Although Paul talks about the second issue, meat that were bought from Idol sacrifices, which he thinks those will not defile us (Romans 14, 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians), yet Paul was cautious and asked the early church to be sensitive towards the weaker brother sister.

From the Jewish perspective, it was ceremonially unclean to eat meat that had blood in it, and it was meat from idol worship. In this context, I think James is asking the early church, even the Gentiles, to stay away from idol worshiping ceremonies, which includes all kind of strange practices.

### **Application**

#### **1. How do we face arguments in the Church.**

I find here searching God's will and commandment rather than personal preferences.

Ajith Fernando says: "Peter was the first to get up and speak on behalf of Paul's side in the controversy. This is typical of the honorable commitment to God's truth rather than to personal preferences and prestige that characterized the attitudes and behavior of the leaders at this council."<sup>3</sup>

#### **2. Be sensitive towards the weaker sister and brother**

I wore shorts in a village where I was serving. My deacon brothers told me that was not appropriate in our village. I represented their church. Badveli should wear proper clothing. I was young, and I wanted to rebel against it. Then I started thinking. I want to gain their trust, and I don't need any unnecessary obstacles in my ministry.

#### **3. There is no Jew or Greek; we all are equal in the sight of God**

We are in the business of building bridges. See if we have walls that separate us. The letter to the Galatians is a good letter to remind us that.

**So in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith,<sup>27</sup> for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ.<sup>28</sup> There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.<sup>29</sup> If you belong**

**to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise. (Gal 3:27-29)**

1. John Stott, *The Spirit, the Church, and the World, the message of Acts*. P 243
2. R.C. Sproul, *You Will Be My Witness to the End of the Earth Acts* P231
3. Ajith Fernando, *The NIV Application Commentary, Acts* P 417