

THE JERUSALEM COUNCIL – Part 3

Acts 15

We have been examining Acts chapter 15 and what has come to be called the Jerusalem Council. At that council they made a decision regarding Gentile believers in Jesus and their relationship to the Law of Moses. Today, for the third and final time we come to the same text to delve even deeper into what was going on and the ramifications of that council's decision for us today. So let's read it one more time...

Acts 15:1-35

As I have said the past two Sundays, in my estimation this passage rates among **the most significant, important, pivotal passages in the entire Bible**. For with it we see a clear shift taking place. The book of Hebrews, in a very methodical manner, as we examined last Sunday, outlines this shift. But there it is mere words; here, in Acts 15, it was real life.

And what was the shift? **It was the shift from being under the Law of Moses to being under the Law of Christ**. And while the Law of Christ is just as binding, and just as much a **yoke upon our necks** as the Law of Moses ever could have been, the Law of Christ is a law written on our hearts and not just on stone. The Jews of the first century were oriented towards observing the law that was written on stone, and due to that their hearts became like that stone: hard, unbending, unyielding, unsympathetic. But the Law of Christ is ultimately the Law of love, mercy, grace and forgiveness. And when we heed THAT law, it keeps us from becoming hard-hearted.

So instead of commanding these new Gentile believers to, in effect, become Jewish prostelytes, the decision of the Jerusalem Council was to **let them continue as Gentiles**. They were to be changed Gentiles to be sure (for that is what Jesus and his Holy Spirit do to us when we open our hearts to him), but these Gentile believers in Jesus, they decided, were not to be encumbered by the 613 laws found in Law of Moses. So love Jesus...avoid 4 things that would **clearly irritate and alienate any Jew** who might observe you...but live your Gentile life. That was the decision of the council...at least that is how I read it.

Now last Sunday, near the end of the sermon, I suggested that this didn't leave these Gentile believers in Jesus in any kind of **lawless** state. They still

were to, as Jesus had said, "obey everything that I have commanded." And while we may not have recorded for us **everything that Jesus commanded**, we know that his teachings were not in any way opposed to the Law of Moses. Indeed, if anything, they took the Law of Moses and just **pushed it further**, pushing us to deal not just with what we do, but also with how we think, and speak. And so Paul, as we noted last Sunday, would tell the believers in Corinth that fornicators, thieves, drunkards and the like would not enter the kingdom of God. Some of the things Paul warned about were **not even mentioned** at the Jerusalem Council. So where did he get these from? He got them from Christ's teachings...Christ's commands.

To tell the people in Corinth to avoid adultery, well that would have fit under "sexual immorality" – one of the four things James said the Gentiles should be told to avoid

But something like thievery wasn't mentioned by James, yet it made Paul's list.

And drunkenness wasn't mentioned by James **NOR IS IT FOUND IN THE LAW OF MOSES!**

So it all goes back to Jesus' teaching.

Today, most Christians erroneously herald the Ten Commandments as giving us direction for our lives: warning us about what we must be certain to avoid and what we should do.

- So they would say, "You shall not kill" because that is the 6th commandment.
- And "You shall not make any graven images" because that is the 2nd commandment.
- They will teach against thievery, and lying, and coveting, all because these are warned against in the 10 commandments.

So convinced are **most Christians** that the 10 commandments (the heart of the Law of Moses) are our guide that if you were to ask the average Christian "Should we obey the 10 commandments?" they would say, "Yes, absolutely."

And yet...and yet...(and I have been making this point for over 3 decades now)...these same Christians will **violate the 10 commandments** every week and not even bat an eye or feel a twinge of guilt over it. That is to say, the same ones that would put up a 10 commandments poster in their yard will **violate** what is written on that poster and **do it with a smile**. This is either **hypocrisy of the worst sort** or **reflects an incredible ignorance** of

what they have posted and say they believe. I am speaking, of course, about the 4th commandment.

Exodus 20:8-11

The Jews of Jesus' and Paul's day understood this commandment quite clearly. It had been defined for them back in the Old Testament scriptures...in the Law of Moses...

Numbers 15:32-36

The prophet Isaiah picked up on this and explained further what it meant to keep the Sabbath...

Isaiah 58:13-14

But we live in an age where evangelical church goers will post the 10 commandments in their yard or at their place of business and then be seen washing their car, mowing their grass, playing ball, going for a swim or a hike, or shopping at the mall on what THEY would say is the Sabbath...and think nothing of it. By definition these are all **SABBATH BREAKERS worthy of DEATH under the Law of Moses.**

So don't tell us that when the Jerusalem Council freed the Gentiles from an obligation to keep the Law of Moses, they ONLY MEANT the cultural and ceremonial parts of the law, but that they still intended for the Gentiles to keep the 10 commandments. At least don't tell us that if you are not going to live up to it yourself! But better is to understand that we today are truly **NOT IN ANY WAY** under the Law of Moses. Instead we are under a New Covenant, a New Law, the Law of Christ.

And if you will accept THAT, then suddenly some of Paul's teachings make a lot more sense...verses like...

Romans 14:5 or
Colossians 2:16

The Sabbath, according to the Old Testament scriptures, was a SIGN of God's covenant with Israel.

Ezekiel 20:12

Now, keeping a Sabbath...a day of rest...makes good sense. Arnold Schwazzenegar, no convert to Jesus (as far as I know), in his book Pumping Iron suggests that the ideal workout schedule for every body builder is to work at it hard for six days, but then take a seventh day off.

Jesus seems to have alluded to this same WISDOM of Sabbath rest when he said in Mark 2:27 "The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath."

So, have a Sabbath rest, sure. But understand that under the New Covenant of Jesus, you will not be stoned if you pick up sticks, play ball or wash your car on Sunday. Tim Martin taught you on this same theme only a few months ago.

But what about Jews who come to Jesus? To have Gentiles who never had any covenantal relationship with God, and no alliance to any sort of covenant law, sing "*free from the law – oh, happy condition*" is one thing. But what about the Jews? What about all those at the Jerusalem Council...every one of which was a Jew? Were they also now free from the Law of Moses?

Acts chapter 15 doesn't address that question. Nor does it give us, as readers, any indication that the question even came up. Peter's little quip about the Law of Moses being a "yoke upon our necks" may indicate that he, at least, WISHED that what was apparently coming for the Gentiles could also come to them. But this question is not answered in Acts 15.

But what about elsewhere?

Approximately 2 weeks ago, Jews around the globe, celebrated Yom Kippur (the Day of Atonement, sometimes pronounced yam kipper, but more correctly pronounced Yom Kaphar, as Yom Kaphar means, quite literally, "Day of Covering"). As those who believe in Jesus we understand that truly when Jesus died on the cross **he COVERED our sins**, he **covered over** all our transgressions. We now have an IMPUTED RIGHTEOUSNESS which I have, through the years, illustrated by putting on a heavy BEAR SKIN COAT and GLOVES. Those heavy pieces of clothing COVER ME, and affect me in nearly every way.

But why do these Jews – not just orthodox Jews but even many conservative, reformed and secular Jews – remember Yom Kippur, considered the most holy of all holidays within Judaism?

The answer is found in the scriptures...

Leviticus 23:26-32

It is that little line in verse 31 that is the catch: "It is a statute **forever** throughout your generations in all your dwelling places." That is, if you are Jewish, no matter where you are or when you live, you are to keep the Day of Atonement. That was certainly the thrust of those verses.

And so, in Israel, which in nearly every way is truly **a secular state**, on Yom Kippur there is no traffic for there is no driving of cars, no shops are open, no planes fly in or out of Israel on that one day. No other day is like it. But Yom Kippur is to be kept because it is a statute "FOREVER."

So, is a Messianic Jew – a believer in "Yeshua Hamashiach" – in Jesus the Messiah – is such a Jew under this obligation or not?

Seems like a simple enough question. So what is the answer?

Although the Jerusalem Council didn't deal with this question, it seems to me that the answer has to be that even the Jew who has turned to Jesus for their righteousness...even that Jew is **no longer under an obligation** to keep the Law of Moses. This is not because they have no regard for the law, but because they believe the law was fulfilled – completed – in Jesus. So a belief in and celebration of Jesus is actually their keeping of the law.

Romans 10:4

Galatians 3:23-29

The Judaizers wished to make the Gentiles like themselves: placed under the yoke of the Law of Moses. But what really happened is that believing Jews have now been made the like the Gentiles: free from the yoke of the Law of Moses.

Is it therefore **WRONG** for a Jew to keep a Jewish holy day (like Yom Kippur, or any other feast day)? I don't believe so...any more than it is

wrong for a Gentile to keep a Sabbath day of rest. As long as in each case – be it the Jew or the Gentile – there is no confusion in their mind as to what God requires of them. What is required of them is faith in Christ...an obedient faith in Christ and his word.

Galatians 5:1-3

Paul's point is that if one feels **one MUST keep some part of the Law** of Moses, then, by definition, one is obligated to **keep it all**. And if you are going to try and keep it all you had better do it perfectly, or you will be damned all the more for even trying!

For either Jesus truly saved us by His righteousness or he did not.

Either His sacrifice was sufficient or it was not.

Either "all we have is Christ" or we have nothing.

For weeks Burning Hearts member Paul Avery has been in the older adult Sunday School class harping on how the bulk of evangelicals live, act, and seemingly believe that the way to becoming righteous is by us **trying harder**. Paul has placed this under what theologians have called "infused righteousness" – the notion that the righteousness of God in Christ becomes ours **as we more and more TRY and be like Jesus**. But what does the Bible teach? It teaches that God justifies the sinner! And he does that by imputing to us – by placing upon us – the righteousness of Christ.

So, there is no required observance of the Law of Moses for the believing Jew. But, again, what about a voluntary observance?

The apostle Paul answers that issue for us by his own example...

Acts 16:1-3

Without this understanding about the Law of Moses that I have been giving you for the past half hour, these verses would make absolutely no sense. For here we have Paul, who had JUST LEFT the Jerusalem Council in which it was concluded that Gentiles DON'T need to keep the Law of Moses, and what does Paul do? He has Timothy circumcised! What was Paul doing? Hadn't he been listening to what the Jerusalem Council decided???

The language of verse 3 is that Paul "took him (Timothy)...and circumcised him." Now whether or not we should take that to mean that Paul himself **literally did the circumcising**, or that he had it done...well, who knows? I'm going to suppose that Paul had it done to Timothy.

But there is just NO WAY that anyone can read that text as suggesting that Paul, who had been at that Jerusalem Council, felt that he HAD to have that done. No, the reason that it was done was **the same reason** that James outlined the four things for Gentile believers in Jesus to avoid. It had nothing to do with imposing or keeping the law of Moses. It was all about trying not to be a stumbling block to some Jew who might seriously consider the claims of Jesus.

So obliged to keep the Law of Moses? **No**
But open to voluntarily keeping it, observing it, remembering it? Sure.

And that is what we have with the Seed of Abraham Fellowship that has been meeting for years and will hopefully soon be meeting here on Saturday mornings. Some of the things they do at their meetings are very "Jewish." They sing some songs in Hebrew; they talk some in Hebrew; they remember the Old Testament feasts; they put on a play at the time of Purim. But this is **all done voluntarily** without the slightest hint or suggestion that they HAVE to do any of these things.

For P.B. Bliss did indeed speak for ALL who have come to Jesus when he suggested we could sing,

*Free from the law – oh, happy condition
Jesus hath bled and there is remission
Cursed by the law and bruised by the fall,
Christ hath redeemed us, once for all.*

In the book of Galatians Paul wrote that the law was but a tutor to bring us to Christ. But once we have come to him, we no longer need that tutor.

The law of Moses was the shadow of the reality that was to come. Now, in Christ alone, we have all that we need.

He is our rock
He is our Savior
He is our Redeemer...HE IS OUR LAW.