

Bibles???

The Word of God is the Absolute Truth and the Final Authority

Turn your bibles with me to Acts 15

For the past couple of weeks, we have been seeing Paul's first missionary journey, preaching to the Gentiles in the area of Galatia.

And for a period of about 2 years, they traveled about 1200 miles by sea and by foot, proclaiming the gospel.

And the gentiles, for the most part, responded to the gospel – along with some Jews.

So Paul and Barnabas began to establish churches in these communities where they would come together and be equipped by hearing God's word.

So, now – they have returned back to where they started from – Antioch

And at the end of ch 14, Dr. Luke tells us that Paul and Barnabas stayed there a long time telling the disciples there everything that God had done in their missionary journey.

This was a joyous time –

Until opposition and division came upon the church –

This time, the opposition/division is not from the Jewish religious leaders – the opposition/division is from within the church.

So, we will see how the Holy Spirit guided the early church to resolve the division.

Let's pray...

[Act 15:1-29 NKJV] 1 And certain [men] came down from Judea and taught the brethren, "Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved."

Paul and Barnabas were sharing in Antioch – and then the scriptures tell us that certain men came from Judea.

These certain men – they are not the Jewish religious rulers that were chasing Paul and Barnabas from town to town.

The certain men that showed up to Antioch – were believers.

They were Christian.

And they felt compelled to travel 300 miles from Jerusalem to Antioch – to tell the disciples in Antioch that Paul and Barnabas have it all wrong.

“They forgot to teach you that you need to be circumcised.”

And the reason that they stressed circumcision was not for better health or so that they could fit in with the social customs of the Jews.

They were stressing that circumcision was a requirement for salvation.

And as we will see later on – they also believed that in order for them to be truly saved, they had to be Jewish first.

“It’s good that they believe in the work of Jesus upon the cross, but...

“These new Christians are not really saved because they still eat BLT’s – they are not following our dietary laws”

“These new Christians are not really saved because they work on the Sabbath”

2 Therefore, when Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and dispute with them, they determined that Paul and Barnabas and certain others of them should go up to Jerusalem, to the apostles and elders, about this question.

Paul and Barnabas confront these men –

This was a big deal – they couldn’t just agree to disagree on this issue –

This was not an issue whether women have to wear skirts in church or whether it is ok to worship with drums.

this was at the core of what it meant to be a follower of Jesus Christ.

Now, think about this.

Paul was commissioned by Jesus on the road to Damascus.

He was led by the Holy Spirit out of Antioch – he could have easily said, “What I trumps whatever you guys have to say”

But he didn't, the church decides to send him back to Jerusalem – because it is most likely that these certain men had been sent out from there.

So, he takes the opportunity to correct them as well.

3 So, being sent on their way by the church, they passed through Phoenicia and Samaria, describing the conversion of the Gentiles; and they caused great joy to all the brethren.

So, as they are traveling to Jerusalem – Paul and Barnabas continue to share how God was working among the gentiles – and this news brought joy to the believers along the way.

Now, contrast the joy that Paul and Barnabas brought to the heaviness that the certain men brought Antioch.

As believers, we can bring joy wherever we go because the gospel is such good news.

We have the privilege of telling people, “Your sins are forgiven. You don't have to be better or try to harder.

The price has been paid- the work of redemption is completed.

4 And when they had come to Jerusalem, they were received by the church and the apostles and the elders; and they reported all things that God had done with them. 5 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."

Here in verse 5, we see the group within the church (believers) who were adamant that Gentile believers had to be converted to Judaism in order to be saved.

They were not denying Jesus Christ – they were simply adding a requirement for salvation.

And the reason that they did this was because they couldn't let go of their way of thinking.

As Jews, their whole perspective was that one earns acceptance by God by being good and following the Law.

And now that they believe in Jesus – they still want to justify themselves by trying to keep the law – in their minds, Jesus is going to help them keep the law – and therefore, they will be able to be justified before God based on their self-righteousness.

In our study last week, when the people began to try to worship Paul and Barnabas – one of the things that Paul tells them to turn away from their pagan gods.

He didn't want them to simply add Jesus to their other gods.

That is exactly what this group of believers has done – they have simply added Jesus to their religious beliefs.

[Gal 2:16 NKJV] 16 "knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the law but by faith in Jesus Christ, even we have believed in Christ Jesus, that we might be justified by faith in Christ and not by the works of the law; for by the works of the law no flesh shall be justified.

We cannot be justified by the Law – because the law requires perfection.

If one breaks one law, one is condemned.

And we've all broken at least one law.

Instead, our salvation depends on what God did for us, by sending His own Son to die in our place, to pay for the penalty of our sins.

And all we can do is accept or reject God's free gift of eternal life.

6 Now the apostles and elders came together to consider this matter. 7 And when there had been much dispute, Peter rose up [and] said to them: "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.

Peter here is referring to what occurred back in Acts 10 and 11.

When he receives the vision and shares the gospel with Cornelius and his family.

Now, there are two reasons why Peter brings this up.

The first reason is because when he shared the gospel with Cornelius and his family, he didn't force them to convert to Judaism.

The second reason that he retells the story is because of what happened while he was preaching.

8 "So God, who knows the heart, acknowledged them by giving them the Holy Spirit, just as [He did] to us, 9 "and made no distinction between us and them, purifying their hearts by faith

As Peter was sharing the gospel with Cornelius and his household, the Holy Spirit fell upon them and they began to speak in tongues.

The baptism of the Holy Spirit and the evidence of them speaking in tongues was proof that God had acknowledged them.

And the significance was that it was in the same manner that it occurred to the Jews at Pentecost.

Don't miss Peter's main point – God had already made clear HOW people are saved – through faith in Jesus!

. 10 "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?"

What Peter is saying here in verse 10 –

He is saying that God settled the issues back at Cornelius' house.

He made it clear that He wanted to save Gentiles – through faith in Christ alone.

So Peter is asking this sect "Why are you guys bringing it up again?"

To demand something more was to put words in God's mouth.

They were trying to add a burden to the gentiles by having them keep the law.

[Gal 5:1 NKJV] 1 Stand fast therefore in the liberty by which Christ has made us free, and do not be entangled again with a yoke of bondage.

No one except Jesus Christ was able to keep the law.

This group was trying to force the Gentile Christians to keep something that they themselves were never able to keep.

When the law was first given in the book of Exodus on Mt Sinai, the first thing that happened when Moses came down the mountain was that the people were worshipping the golden calf.

And from Exodus all the way to the last historical book in the OT – Nehemiah, we find the Jews sinning against God.

At the end of Nehemiah, after they had returned from exile and rebuilt the city walls, the book ends with the Jews intermarrying with those that worshipped pagan gods.

They didn't learn their lesson – and Nehemiah had to take matters into his own hands and starts pulling their hair out.

The Law was an unbearable yoke.

That is why Jesus said –

Matt 11

[Mat 11:29-30 NKJV] 29 "Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. 30 "For My yoke [is] easy and My burden is light."

He spoke that to a people who'd been loaded down with a heavy yoke of burdensome traditions and the crushing burden of over 600 rules the rabbis had parsed from the law of Moses.

In this yoke, Jesus does all the work; we're just along for the ride.

He's is the one who satisfies God's righteous requirements.

Our single duty is to hang out with Him, to go with Him.

11 "But we believe that through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ we shall be saved in the same manner as they."

Peter is reminding the people of the basics, that salvation comes through God's grace, and it is received by believing.

Notice how Peter phrases it, not saying, "they shall be saved like us", but we shall be saved just like them"!

By the way, this is the last time we see Peter in the book of Acts -

12 Then all the multitude kept silent and listened to Barnabas and Paul declaring how many miracles and wonders God had worked through them among the Gentiles.

Paul and Barnabas get up before the council and they start to provide details of what happened in Antioch and during the first missionary journey – as they preached to the gentiles.

This was important because the purpose of miracles was to confirm the message preached by Paul and Barnabas as being from God.

13 And after they had become silent, James answered, saying, "Men [and] brethren, listen to me:

This is James, the half-brother of Jesus – he became the leader of the church in Jerusalem.

14 "Simon (this is Peter's Hebrew name has declared how God at the first visited the Gentiles to take out of them a people for His name. 15 "And with this the words of the prophets agree, just as it is written: 16 '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; 17 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.' 18 "Known to God from eternity are all His works.

Here in verse 15-17, James is quoting from Amos (9:11-12)

And this was a prophesy that had to do with the Messiah's restored kingdom.

The point is that people other than the Jews would be part of the Messiah's restored kingdom – speaking of Gentiles

Gentiles would be able to have fellowship with God through faith, not works.

I had you make a note of verse 18

And the reason is that verse 18 tells us that salvation by grace through faith was the way it had always been

Grace was not a last minute addition, an amendment to the divine plan because not enough people were making it to heaven.

Grace was never plan B -

Faith had always been the bottom line in being right with God.

1) Abraham was justified by faith.

2) Moses said that the essence of the entire law was summed up in the call to love God with all your heart, soul and strength (Deut 6:5)

3) David, the one described as being after God's own heart said (psalm 27:4), "One thing I have desired of the LORD, That will I seek: That I may dwell in the house of the LORD All the days of my life"

4) All the prophets had called the people to return their hearts to the Lord

19 "Therefore I judge that we should not trouble those from among the Gentiles who are turning to God,

There it is—Gentiles do NOT have to get circumcised, keep kosher, observe Sabbath & keep the other over 600 rules of the Mosaic law.

Faith in Jesus as Lord & Savior satisfies God's requirements & if they have that, because they're in relationship with Him, He'll teach them what they need to know & show them how to walk in holiness.

So James sides with Paul, Barnabas and Peter

20 "but that we write to them to abstain from things polluted by idols, [from] sexual immorality, [from] things strangled, and [from] blood. 21 "For Moses has had throughout many generations those who preach him in every city, being read in the synagogues every Sabbath."

Once the council decided that the gentiles were not going to be asked to convert to Judaism, there was another issue that had to be taken care of.

How were the gentile Christians and Jewish Christians supposed to fellowship with one another.

Remember, the council only decided that the gentiles were not going to be required to convert to Judaism and follow the Mosaic laws.

Many of the Jewish Christians still followed kosher diets.

So the council provides guidelines for the gentile Christians to abstain from the following –

1. Things polluted by idols had to do with meat that had been offered to pagan gods. The pagan priests would resell a portion of the meat that was offered in their pagan sacrifices. Jews considered such meat an abomination because it had been devoted to a false god.

Most Gentiles thought nothing of it; it was just meat. Who cares where it came from. One of the reasons Jews wouldn't eat with Gentiles was because of a fear of having a plate of this kind of meat put in front of them

2. Abstaining from sexual immorality was another one. Remember that the Jews had a list of rules they were following. The Gentiles didn't have any. And in the Greek and Roman world, sexual immorality was rampant – they had prostitutes in the pagan temples. So the gentile Christians needed to understand that they could no longer continue in the ways of the world.
3. They were to stay away from eating strangled animals and blood. The Jews followed a very strict kosher diet. One of the things they were not allowed to eat was blood. They had to kill an animal a certain way.

Why did God ask the Jews to do this?

Because He wanted to use blood in a specific way, to be a symbol of the life of an animal, and to use it as a way of paying the price for another person's sin. God didn't want the Jews to lose the idea that blood could pay for sins. He wanted them to understand why their Messiah had to die on a cross and shed His blood for them.

The gentiles didn't care how the meat got to their plate.

The important thing for us to remember today is that these 3 things were simply guidelines to safeguard close fellowship between the followers of Christ.

And from verse 22-29, we have the letter that was written to the churches.

22 Then it pleased the apostles and elders, with the whole church, to send chosen men of their own company to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas, [namely], Judas who was also named Barsabas, and Silas, leading men among the brethren. 23 They wrote this [letter] by them: The apostles, the elders, and the brethren, To the brethren who are of the Gentiles in Antioch, Syria, and Cilicia: Greetings. 24 Since we have heard that some who went out from us have troubled you with words, unsettling your souls, saying, "[You must] be circumcised and keep the law"--to whom we gave no [such] commandment-- 25 it seemed good to us, being assembled with one accord, to send chosen men to you with our beloved Barnabas and Paul, 26 men who have risked their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. 27 We have therefore sent Judas and Silas, who will also report the same things by word of mouth. 28 For it seemed good to the Holy Spirit, and to us, to lay upon you no greater burden than these necessary things: 29 that you abstain from things offered to idols, from blood, from things strangled, and from sexual immorality. If you keep yourselves from these, you will do well. Farewell.

As we end, I want to ask you to stop & consider how crucial unity was in the early church.

The issue of what to do with Gentiles who were coming to Christ was the first great theological crisis the Church faced

They resolved it handily by looking to Scripture & the counsel of the Spirit.

But once the theological & doctrinal details were settled, they moved immediately to the practical implications of how the entrance of Gentiles would affect the unity of believers.

The potential for conflict between Gentiles & Jews was huge because of their diverse cultures.

So, James spelled out guidelines they needed to immediately install to make sure no rift occurred.

He knew as the Gentiles walked with Christ, they would grow in holiness.

However, the issues of diet and morality would have been an immediate stumbling block to the fellowship among the early church.

Realizing how important unity was to these first believers, we have to ask ourselves –
How important is it to us?

Are we protecting & safeguarding unity among those around us, or are we allies of the enemy sowing discord through envy, gossip, criticism, conflict, anger, bitterness, & enmity?

Are our choices aimed at unity & fellowship or division & hostility?

When Jesus called the disciples to follow Him, it was a call to follow alongside others.

He said THE distinguishing mark of belonging to Him would be the LOVE we have for one another.

I close with this -

Psalm 133:1 • Behold, how good and how pleasant it is For brethren to dwell together in unity!

Let's pray...

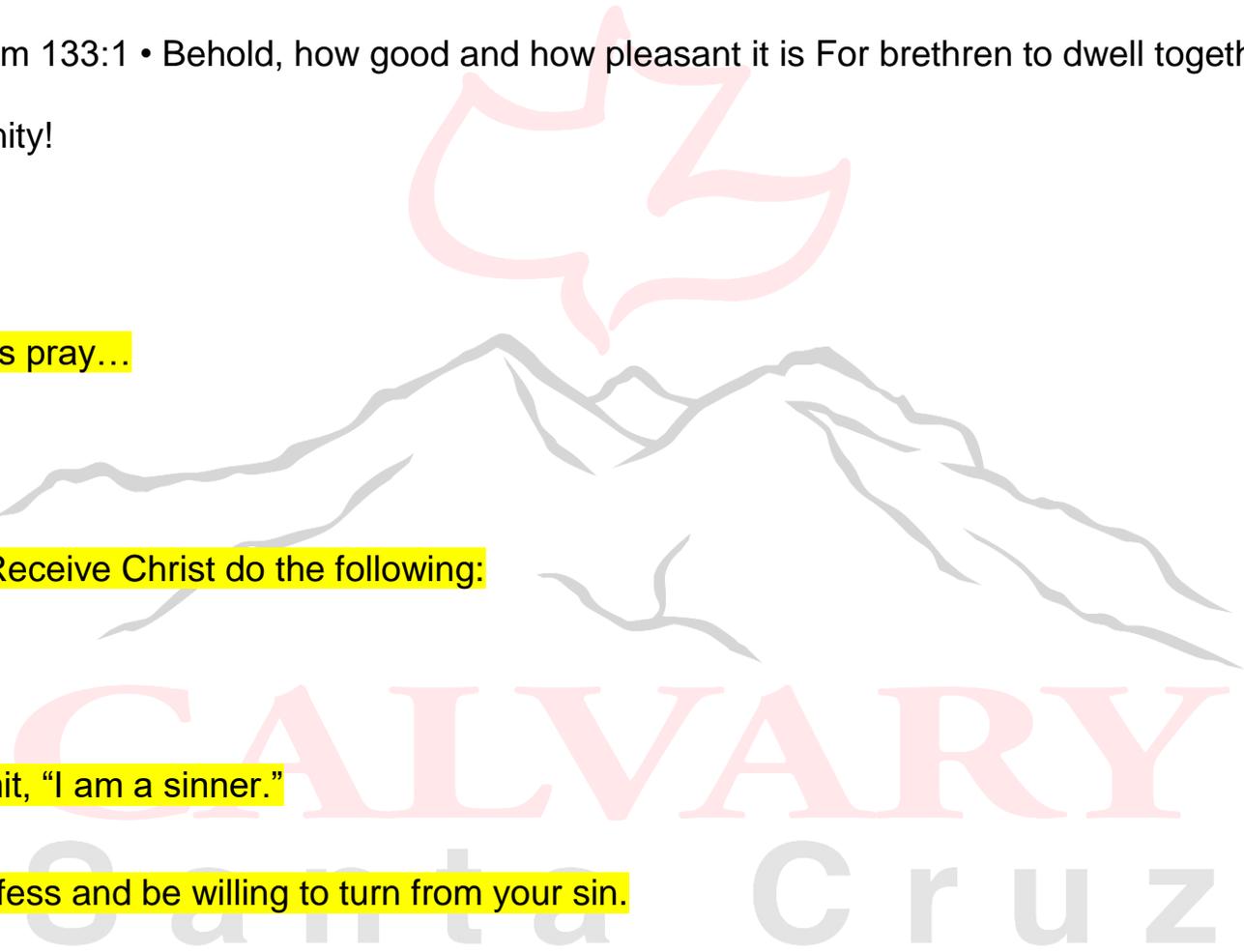
To Receive Christ do the following:

Admit, "I am a sinner."

Confess and be willing to turn from your sin.

Believe, by faith that Jesus Christ died for you on the cross.

Receive, through prayer, Jesus Christ into your heart and receive eternal life.



Dear Lord Jesus,

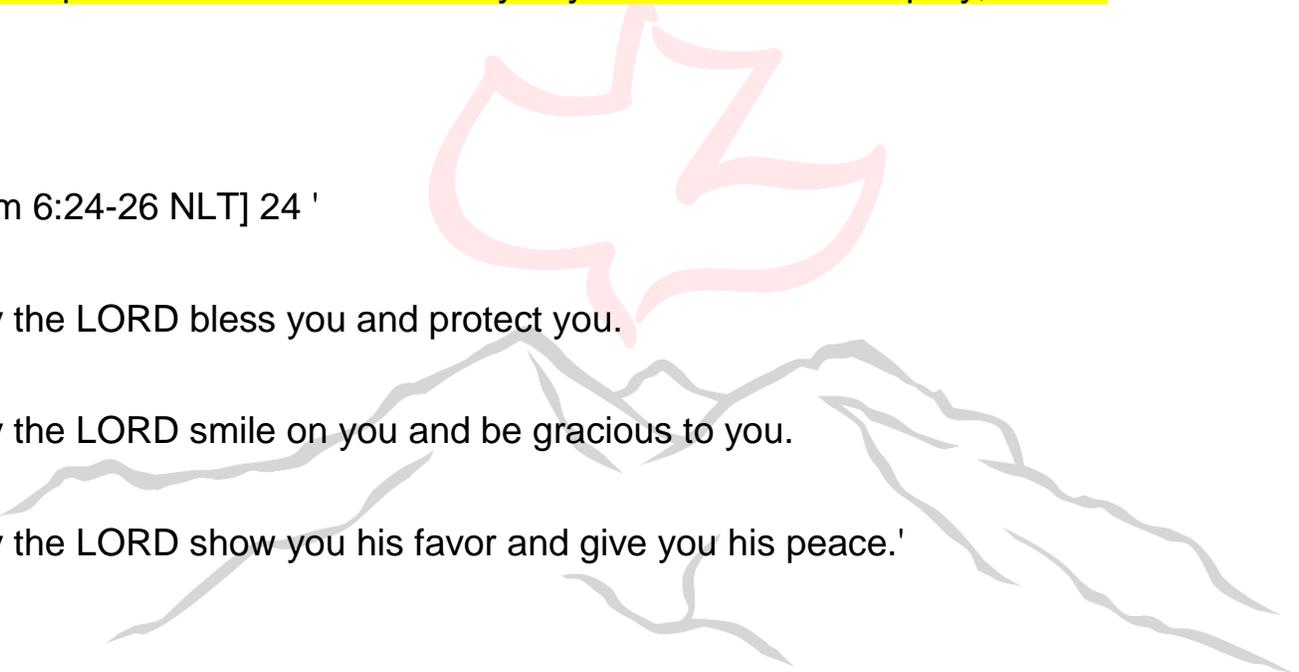
I know that I am a sinner and need Your forgiveness. I believe that You died on the cross for my sins. Please forgive me for my sins and cleanse me by Your blood. I accept You by faith as my personal Lord and Savior. Give me a thirst for Your Word and Help me to follow You all of my days. In Jesus' name I pray, Amen.

[Num 6:24-26 NLT] 24 '

May the LORD bless you and protect you.

May the LORD smile on you and be gracious to you.

May the LORD show you his favor and give you his peace.'



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