



Approaching God

Read this portion of Psalm 29 and begin with an opening prayer

Ascribe to the LORD, you heavenly beings, ascribe to the LORD glory and strength. Ascribe to the LORD the glory due his name; worship the LORD in the splendor of his holiness. The voice of the LORD is over the waters; the God of glory thunders, the LORD thunders over the mighty waters. The voice of the LORD is powerful; the voice of the LORD is majestic. (Psalm 29:1-4)

The person of faith hears something to which others are deaf: the voice of God. His voice is heard in a wide range of sound: from the “still small voice” that calms the heart, to this thunderous boom in Psalm 29 that inspires awe and wonder. Confess to the Lord this morning that you don’t hear enough of what he has to say and ask that he would cure any deafness so that his deep authoritative word would resound in your life and world around you.

Acts 15:1-21

Passage Introduction: The Council at Jerusalem

Acts 15 chronicles the first council in church history. Several councils stand as pillars of doctrine and theological clarification. (Nicea 325, Constantinople 381, Chalcedon 451) Much like these ecumenical councils which marked the first centuries of the church’s history, the Council of Jerusalem in Acts 15 convened over vital matters central to the gospel. Acts 15 teaches us the importance of doctrine and sound teaching. The church in its infancy came under the assault of false teaching. Luke will recount for us in this pivotal chapter the conviction of the apostles and their steadfast theological fidelity for the sake of the gospel.

Bible Reading, Study & Meditation

Start with Engaging the Text: Take a few minutes to highlight, circle, or underline key words.

Use the space in the margin to jot down notes, or themes/ideas that stand out as important.

Acts 15:1-21 - 1 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.” **2** 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. **3** 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. **4** 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. **5** Then some of the believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees stood up and said, “The Gentiles must be circumcised and required to keep the law of Moses.”

Notes:

6 The apostles and elders met to consider this question. **7** After much discussion, Peter got up and addressed them: “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. **8** God, who knows the heart, showed that he accepted them by giving the Holy Spirit to them, just as he did to us. **9** He did not discriminate between us and them, for he purified their hearts by faith. **10** 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? **11** No! We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved, just as they are.”

12 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. **13** When they finished, James spoke up. “Brothers,” he said, “listen to me. **14** Simon has described to us how God first intervened to choose a people for his name from the Gentiles. **15** The words of the prophets are in agreement with this, as it is written:

16 *“After this I will return and rebuild David’s fallen tent. Its ruins I will rebuild, and I will restore it, **17** that the rest of mankind may seek the Lord, even all the Gentiles who bear my name, says the Lord, who does these things’ — **18** things known from long ago.”*

19 “It is my judgment, therefore, that we should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God. **20** 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. **21** For the law of Moses has been preached in every city from the earliest times and is read in the synagogues on every Sabbath.”

What was at issue for the Pharisees? (From Acts Commentary by: Kent Hughes)

“Into the Pharisees’ neat, well-ordered life came the claims of Christ, and with that an agonizing civil war within. Then came conversion—new life from above. Of course, they gained so much by knowing Christ, but parents, other relatives, and friends would consider them dead. They lost everything because of their association with the Savior. It was natural for some of them to find it difficult to make a clean break with their past as Pharisees. Though Christians, they could not bring themselves to give away centuries of distinctives that had set their people apart from the world. So with good intentions they thrust those distinctives and traditions onto others. If Jesus was the Hebrew Messiah, anyone wanting his salvation would have to become a Hebrew first! How else could he know the full meaning and purpose of God? The Pharisee Christians banded together to make sure no one slipped by Mount Sinai on the way to Calvary!”

Questions for Reflection & Meditation

- What are 2 or 3 things you observe about God the Father, Son, or Holy Spirit in this passage?
- Acts 15 is about controversy in the early church. What is the controversy and what do you think is at stake in this controversy?
- By all accounts James became a prominent leader in the first generation of Christianity (Galatians 1:19 and 2:9). His judgment, summing up the debate and its results, is extremely important. In verses 15:16-18 James quotes from Amos 9:11-12. What bearing does this Scripture have on the controversy? What can we learn from the way James leads in this situation?

Key Takeaway:

Choose the verse or truth that is most striking and/or helpful to you today. Paraphrase the thought or verse in your own words.

Close in Prayer:

O Lord, help us to see any way we are mixing law with your grace, any false standards we are imposing on others, any conditions we are placing on our acceptance of them. Forgive us, cleanse us, shower us once again with your grace and love and mercy. Amen.