

THURSDAY 15 September "The Ultimate Question?" (Acts 15:1-6)

Good morning my "Walking with Jesus" friends,

As you look back over your life, I'm sure you can see what you might call "Defining Moments". Perhaps they were tragic events or maybe glorious, wonderful events...but regardless of whether they brought you joy or heartbreak, these "Defining Moments" profoundly affected the rest of your life. Can you remember some of those cataclysmic experiences in your life journey?

In the past few days, we've been sitting in a little house in Syrian Antioch in the year 48ad, watching the man known as the apostle Paul write his first letter to Gentile Christians in the region today known as Turkey, where he and Barnabas has travelled to four cities and proclaimed the Gospel of Jesus. The letter Paul is writing is known in our Bible as Galatians. Already in his first chapter Paul has explained WHY he's writing this letter and to whom. He has explained his unique background, education, and one of many of his 'defining moments' which was actually *a three-year period of time in which God Himself taught Paul the great truths of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, the Messiah, the Son of God.* Those truths not only reshaped Paul's entire life, they became the focus of his preaching, teaching and writing for the rest of his life. Come on, let's join a few other people sitting in Paul's little house as he rolls out the parchment to begin writing now his second chapter.

Paul speaks each word carefully as he writes: ***"Fourteen years later I went up again to Jerusalem, this time with Barnabas. I took Titus along also. I went in response to a revelation and set before them the gospel that I preach among the Gentiles."*** (Galatians 2:1) Paul's life was filled with "defining moments" and what he is describing here was another of them. In fact, this event is recorded in great detail for us by Dr. Luke in Acts 15, so let's look closely at Luke's account of what happened here. You'll recall a few weeks ago we traveled with Paul and Barnabas on their first 'missionary' journey following the log of Acts 13 & 14. The final verse of Acts 14 tells us: ***"On arriving back in Antioch, Paul and Barnabas gathered the church together and reported all that God had done through them and how God had opened the door of faith to the Gentiles. And Paul and Barnabas stayed there in Antioch for a long time with the disciples."***

The record continues in Acts 15:1 with this: ***"Some men came from Judea to Antioch and were teaching the brothers 'Unless you are circumcised, according to the custom taught by Moses, you cannot be saved.' 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 to Jerusalem to see the apostles and elders about this question."*** (Acts 15:1,2)

During those several months Paul and Barnabas enjoyed a very fruitful season of teaching the Gentile Christians in Antioch the very same truths they had taught the Gentiles in Pisidian Antioch, Iconium, Lystra and Derbe over in what is today the country of Turkey. *But suddenly Jewish Christians came from Jerusalem proclaiming that Paul and Barnabas were not teaching the whole truth.*

Now it's important for us to remember what we looked at yesterday, that Paul had received his spiritual instruction of this new Gospel of Jesus Christ directly from the Holy Spirit of God during those three years of solitude spent in the Arabian desert and Damascus. A conflict was arising. A simple but profound conflict. A conflict of TRUTH. The question was simple yet profound: *Does God save a Gentile from their sin ONLY because of their faith in Jesus Christ and Jesus' atonement death sacrifice for their sin? Or must a Gentile man submit to the Jewish circumcision ritual and then ALSO trust in Jesus Christ's atonement death for God to save him from his sin? What must a Gentile man do to be saved by God from his sin?*

This very same question has been asked by MILLIONS of people in every generation, in every place in the world, for the past 2000 years. *What must I DO for God to save me from my sin?* All of you, my "Walking with Jesus" friends around the world, have asked it and maybe wrestled with this question. *So... what is your answer?*

Now for Paul and Barnabas and all the Gentile Christians everywhere in the Roman Empire, in the middle of the first century, *this question must be resolved, and quickly. But by whom?* Those disciples still living who had walked with Jesus, heard Him teach, watched His miracles and been commissioned by Jesus to take His Gospel to the world, were the recognized authorities for the Christian faith in the first century. So, Paul and Barnabas, along with some other Gentile Jesus followers from Antioch, headed to Jerusalem for a meeting. *This would be a 'defining moment' not just for Paul & Barnabas but for Gentile Jesus followers all across the Roman Empire* who were confident they were fully 'born again', redeemed, adopted, sons and daughters of Almighty God because they had placed their full faith and trust in Jesus Christ and His atonement death as full payment for their sin, and they had trusted that God had done His life transforming saving work in them.

But suddenly a huge question emerged: **Is the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ enough for God to save me from my sin?** Is there more I need to do to accomplish my salvation? *And specifically, must I FIRST submit to Jewish circumcision before I am eligible to place my full faith in Jesus Christ and be saved by God?* Can you see the tremendous dilemma my friends?

I wonder if you can see that it really comes down to this: IF I need to do or can do something to save myself, in addition to all Jesus has done through His perfect life, His atonement death and His resurrection... then WHY did Jesus have to die? *If Jesus' death is not enough, how could I, a sinful person, do ANYTHING to augment what Jesus, the Son of God, did for my salvation!?*

And if I must do something to add to Jesus' atonement death, what must I do, and when must I do it, to earn the completion of my salvation from my sin condemnation? Do you see this very same question must be answered by you and me and every living human being.

Luke continues his description of what happened in this Acts 15 "Defining Moment" by recording: ***"When Paul and Barnabas came to Jerusalem they were welcomed by the church and the apostles and elders, to whom they reported everything God had done through them among the Gentiles."*** (Acts 15:4) When Luke uses the word "church" here, we must remember this is Jerusalem and therefore the Jesus followers here are almost all Jewish Christians. The 'elders' would have been those appointed by the 'apostles' to help them lead and teach and care for the large and growing number of Jewish Christians in Jerusalem. It may have included some of the "deacons" which had been appointed in Acts 6. Of course, we must remember there had already been two martyrs among the leaders of the Jerusalem Jesus movement... Stephen the deacon (Acts 7:58) and James the apostle and brother of John. (Acts 12:2)

I'm so glad to see Paul and Barnabas received a warm welcome and an initial open hearing. But alas, Luke records in Acts 15:5,6: ***"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 obey the law of Moses.' The apostles and the elders met to consider this question."*** There it is my friends. The nice, cordial, warm welcome had turned into a direct, clearly defined war. You see it was Pharisee Jesus followers leading the charge demanding both circumcision and obedience to the law of Moses. As Paul watched and listened, I imagine he knew those Pharisees, for he had been a Pharisee among them. He understood fully what their argument was. It had been his argument too. He had once been adamant that no one could possibly have peace with God without circumcision and obedience to the laws of Moses.

For centuries that was the agreed upon and strongly held position by every God fearing, Scripture honoring Jew. No exceptions. ***BUT then came Paul's defining moment encounters with God which changed his life!*** First, the Damascus road (Acts 9:4); then his baptism with Ananias in Damascus (Acts 9:17); then his three years alone with God in the Arabian desert and Damascus (Gal. 1:17,18); then his year or more in Tarsus again learning from the Holy Spirit (Acts 9:29); then his year in Syrian Antioch teaching this new Gospel to Gentiles there (Acts 11:25,26); then his two yearlong missionary journey with Barnabas into Asia (Acts 13 & 14) and now finally here, standing face to face with his former Pharisee colleagues in Jerusalem. The salvation of the human race hung in the balance! ***WHAT must a person do to earn God's salvation from their sin?***

Let's pause right here... looking at this remarkable scene. Both groups, absolutely confident they are totally right, and convinced God will honor their strong stand on truth. *Both convinced the other group is wrong.* How will God answer the question, for only HE can bring the God honoring truthful answer? Let's return here tomorrow to find out what God did! Meanwhile, *I wonder what you think is the right answer.* **What must you or me or any person in the world do, for God to save them from their sin?**

Today's Scripture is Acts 15:1-6.