

Dr. Robert A. Peterson, The Theology of Luke-Acts, Session 16, Peterson, The Church in Acts, Part 3, and Paul's Example of Ministry, Acts 20:18-32

This is Dr. Robert A. Peterson in his teaching on the theology of Luke-Acts. This is session 16, Peterson, The Church in Acts, Part 3, Paul's Example of Ministry, Acts 20: 18-32.

We continue our lectures on Luke and theology in the book of Acts.

My own writing on the church in Acts, the New Testament people of God in Acts, and we're up to number seven, grace and unity in the church, the great Jerusalem Council passage. But before we even open the Bible, let us turn to the Lord.

Gracious Father, we thank you that you are the Holy Trinity, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. We bow before you. We praise your holy name and thank you for giving us the gospel of Luke and the book of Acts. Help us understand the message of Acts. Help us be productive members of your church, we pray in Jesus' holy name. Amen.

Acts 15, starting with verse 1, but some men came down from Judea and were teaching the brothers, unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.

After Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and debate with them, Paul and Barnabas and some of the others were appointed to go up to Jerusalem to the apostles and the elders about this question. So, being sent on their way by the church, they passed through both Phoenicia and Samaria, describing in detail the conversion of the Gentiles and bringing great joy to all the brothers. When they came to Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the church, the apostles, and the elders, and they declared all that God had done with them.

But some believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees rose up and said it is necessary to circumcise them in order and to order them to keep the law of Moses. The apostles and the elders were gathered together to consider this matter. After there had been much debate, Peter stood up and said to them, brothers, you know that in the early days, God made a choice among you that by my mouth, the Gentiles should hear the word of the gospel and believe.

And God, who knows the heart, bore witness to them by giving them the Holy Spirit, just as he did to us. And he made no distinction between us and them, having cleansed their hearts by faith. Now, therefore, why are you putting God to the test by placing a yoke on the neck of the disciples that neither our fathers nor we have

been able to bear? But we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will.

And all the assembly fell silent. And they listened to Barnabas and Paul as they related what signs and wonders God had done through them among the Gentiles. After they finished speaking, James replied, brothers, listen to me.

Simeon has related how God first visited the Gentiles to take from them a people for his name. And with this, the words of the prophets agree, just as it is written. Here, he quotes Amos, chapter 9, verses 11 and 12.

After this, I will return, and I will rebuild the tent of David that has fallen. I will rebuild its ruins, and I will restore it, that the remnant of mankind may seek the Lord. And all the Gentiles who are called by my name says the Lord, who makes these things known from of old.

James continues, therefore, my judgment is that we should not trouble those of the Gentiles who turn to God but should write them to abstain from the things polluted by idols and from sexual immorality and from what has been strangled and from blood. For from ancient generations, Moses has had in every city those who proclaim him, for he is read every Sabbath in the synagogues. The nascent New Testament church was full of life, zeal, and joy, but that does not mean it was without problems.

We previously examined the way the apostles and the people handled the matter of the neglect of Hellenist widows in Jerusalem. Now we turn our attention to the major theological controversy of the early church, whether Gentiles had to become Jews before they could become Christians. Some Hebrew Christians from Judea came to Antioch and insisted, quote, unless you are circumcised according to the custom prescribed by Moses, you cannot be saved, Acts 15:1. Paul and Barnabas opposed them and debated this matter with them, and then the church in Antioch appointed Paul and Barnabas to go to the church in Jerusalem to deal with this issue.

Acts 15:2. As the missionaries traveled to Jerusalem, they shared with churches in Phoenicia and Samaria how God had granted salvation to the Gentiles, and this brought great joy to the churches. Verse 3. Barrett does not overemphasize the importance of Acts 15 when he writes, quote, the debate itself, 15:6-29, is rightly described as the center of Acts. C.K. Barrett, Acts 15-28, International Critical Commentary, page 696.

The debate itself at the Jerusalem Council, Acts 15:6-29, is rightly described as the center of Acts. The Jerusalem church, including the apostles and elders, welcomed Paul and Barnabas, who shared what the Lord had done through their ministries, verse 4. However, some Jewish believers who were Pharisees argued concerning Gentile converts, quote, it is necessary to circumcise them and to command them to

keep the law of Moses, verse 5. Because this issue was of great importance for the future of the church and its mission, the whole church, with the apostles and elders, gathered to consider this matter, verse 6. Considerable debate ensued, with each side presenting its case to the body. Peter testified how, quote, in the early days, God had used him to bring the gospel to the Gentiles.

God bore witness to the fact that the Gentiles believed in Christ for salvation by giving them the Holy Spirit, just as he had done to believing Jews on the day of Pentecost, Acts 15, verses 7 and 8. Peter was emphatic. God made no distinction between them, us, and them, cleansing their hearts by faith, verse 9. Peter stressed that God saved Gentiles by grace through faith in Christ, the same way that he saved Jews. Then, surprisingly, Peter accused the Jewish Christians who insisted that Gentile converts be circumcised. He accused them of putting God to the test, verse 10.

Now, therefore, why are you putting God to the test by placing a yoke on the neck of the disciples that neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear? David Peterson captures Peter's argument, quote, viewing the way of salvation through faith in Christ as the ultimate expression of God's will for his people. Peter spoke quite frankly about the yoke of the law as an obligation his fellow Jews had never really managed to fulfill. Since God did not require Gentiles who trusted in Jesus to live that way, Peter found it objectionable that some of his fellow Jews wanted to place such a burden on Gentile converts.

Peterson, Acts of the Apostles, 4 to 7. Luke then concluded his summary of Peter's address with a powerful truth. Far from insisting on circumcision as a requirement for salvation, Peter insisted, in verse 11, that we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus just as they will. Here, Peter reverses the field.

Previously, he had argued that his experience at Cornelius's house showed that God worked to save Gentiles as he had previously done to save Jews. Now he affirms that we Jews are saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus in the same way the Gentiles are. He's really leveling the playing field.

He's really saying we're saved the same way by God's grace through faith in Jesus. This passage makes plain an important distinction between Old Testament and New Testament believers. Previously, God had held the Jews responsible for observing circumcision and other features of the Mosaic law.

In Genesis 17, after the Mosaic covenant is given in chapter 12, introduced in 12, ratified in 15, with a sacrifice in 17, circumcision is added, and it could be called the covenant of circumcision, which was how important that was in God's economy at the time. God's people were always saved by grace through faith, either Old Testament saints in anticipation of the coming Messiah or New Testament saints

believing in the Messiah who had come. But God added the Mosaic covenant to the Abrahamic covenant so that the people whom he had redeemed from Egypt were to show their love for him by keeping his commandments.

Exodus 20, verses 2 and 4. Now that Christ, the mediator of the new covenant, had come and ratified it by his death, the ceremonial and sacrificial laws of the Mosaic covenant were obsolete. People were saved by believing in Jesus, crucified and risen, and Gentiles did not have to become Jews in order to be saved. James, citing Amos 9, 11, and 12, adds his weighty testimony to that of Peter, and his voice proves to be decisive for the council.

After James' testimony, what Peter's experience at the house of Cornelius had proved is made into a formal principle by the whole church with its leaders. Gentiles are saved by believing in Jesus and do not have to become Jews before becoming Christians. God makes no distinction between human beings based on race.

Acts 15 and verse 9. God made no distinction between us and them, having cleansed their hearts by faith. The implication is in the same way that he had cleansed ours. Peter speaks as a Hebrew Christian.

Marshall notes the significance of the Jerusalem Council's decision not only for the first-century church but for the church of all time. Quoting Howard Marshall, Acts 247, his commentary on Acts. Luke rightly recognized the fundamental importance of the decision reached at the meeting.

In principle, the need for Gentile Christians to accept the Jewish law was firmly rejected. The principle was of basic significance for the future of the early church, and it remains basic for all time. No national, racial, or social requirements can ever be made conditions for salvation and membership of the church alongside the single and sole requirement of faith in Jesus Christ, through whom the grace of God is brought to sinners.

Marshall, Acts, page 247. This brings us to our eighth vignette from the book of Acts, teaching us concerning the New Testament people of God. Acts 20, Paul's example of church ministry. For years I taught the doctrine of the church to seminarians, and along with the pastoral epistles, we always underlined the importance of this chapter as it gives Paul's philosophy of ministry, his goals, his purposes, his own example, and it's powerful.

Acts 20. Let me get the text in front of us. Paul had gone through Macedonia and Greece. Acts 20 and verse 7 was that breaking of bread which we interpreted as the Lord's Supper passage. We didn't mention that. We did mention Paul spoke way past midnight, a long-winded preacher, and we didn't mention the youth Eutychus falling from a window into a deep sleep.

From the third story, was taken up dead, and Paul raised him up, and then after some more sailing, they came to Miletus. Acts 20:17. Now from Miletus, he sent to Ephesus and called the elders of the church to come to him.

And when they came to him, he said to them, you yourselves know how I lived among you the whole time from the first day that I set foot in Asia, serving the Lord with all humility and with tears and with trials that happened to me through the plots of the Jews, how I did not shrink from declaring to you anything that was profitable and teaching you in public and from house to house, testifying both to Jews and to Greeks of repentance toward God and of faith in our Lord Jesus Christ. And now, behold, I'm going to Jerusalem, constrained by the Spirit, not knowing what will happen to me there, except that the Holy Spirit testifies to me in every city that imprisonment and afflictions await me.

But I do not account for my life of any value or as precious to myself. If only I may finish my course and the ministry that I received from the Lord Jesus to testify to the gospel of the grace of God. And now behold, I know that none of you among whom I have gone about proclaiming the kingdom will see my face again.

Therefore, I testify to you this day that I am innocent of the blood of all, for I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole counsel of God. Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood. I know that after my departure, fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock.

And from among you, your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things to draw away the disciples after them. Therefore, be alert, remembering that for three years, I did not cease night or day to admonish every one with tears. And now I commend you to God and to the word of which is able to build you up and to give you the inheritance among all those who are sanctified.

I coveted no one's silver or gold or apparel. You yourselves know that these hands minister to my necessities and to those who are with me. In all things, I've shown you that by working hard in this way, we must help the weak and remember the words of the Lord Jesus, as he himself said it is more blessed to give than to receive.

When he had said these things, he knelt down and prayed with them all. And there was much weeping on the part of all. They embraced Paul and kissed him, sorrowful, most of all, because of the word he had spoken, that they would not see his face again.

And they accompanied him to the ship.

Paul's speech to the Ephesian elders at Miletus is the only Pauline one addressed to a Christian audience in the book of Acts. Not surprisingly, it has many parallels with Paul's letters.

Compare Bruce, the book of Acts, page 412. It is the richest presentation on the theme of pastoral ministry in Luke Acts. Of course, it also instructs us concerning the New Testament people of God.

For unknown reasons, Paul traveled on land and met his party at Assos, where they took him on board the ship, Acts 20:13 and 14. After a few stops, they bypassed Ephesus, for Paul was in a hurry to get to Jerusalem by Pentecost. Verses 15 and 16.

They came to Miletus from which Paul, quote, sent to Ephesus and summoned the elders, called the elders of the church to come to him. Verse 17. Then they proceeded.

Then he proceeded to encourage and exhort them concerning matters past, present, and future. Paul reviewed how he spent considerable time with believers in Ephesus, serving Christ. Paul spoke of his character and endurance of trials.

Verses 18 and 19. He taught to edify them and did so publicly and from house to house. Verse 20. Teaching you in public and from house to house. ESV. He proclaimed the Jews and Gentiles the way of salvation in Christ, including conversion that consists of repentance toward God and faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.

Verse 21. Paul told the Ephesian elders that the Holy Spirit was leading him to Jerusalem while repeatedly warning him that imprisonment and suffering awaited him there.

Verses 22, 23. He told them how his focus was not on self-preservation but on completing the ministry that Jesus gave him, which was to testify, to bear witness, to testify to the gospel of the grace of God. Verse 24. Paul shocked his hearers by saying they would never see him again.

He spoke of his innocence when proclaiming the gospel to them because he declared to them the whole counsel of God. Verses 25 through 27. Paul then issued the elders a warning to stay on guard for themselves and the church.

He adds solemnity by reminding them that the Holy Spirit appointed them to be overseers and shepherds of God's church. Ultimately, God chose them to be elders and they are to live accordingly. Luke in Acts lays a great emphasis on Christ's resurrection and exaltation to God's side.

He mentions Christ's cross and death a number of times, sometimes linking Jesus' death with the forgiveness of sins, but only one time teaches a doctrine of the atonement, and that is here when he speaks of the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood. The word obtained could be translated as the church of God, which he purchased with his own blood. This is the doctrine of redemption whereby God, through Christ's atoning sacrifice, delivers sinners viewed as slaves of sin.

Though some shy away from the idea of Christ's death being a ransom price that purchases our redemption. Barrett, Acts 15 to 29, page 977. Scripture teaches it here and elsewhere.

Jesus' death is indeed a ransom. Paid to deliver sinners out of the bondage to sin, to set them free, to purchase them for Christ. Mark 10:45, the famous ransom saying.

1 Peter 1:18-19, Revelation 5:9 and 10. Mark 10:45, 1 Peter 1:18-19, Revelation 5:9 and 10. Indeed, Peterson notes, that's David Peterson, noting the other place beside Acts 20:28 where Luke teaches Christ's substitutionary atonement.

It's not in Acts; it's in Luke 22:19 and 20, which we looked at before. That is the at the institution of the Lord's Supper. In Luke's Gospel, Jesus says, this cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood, my violent sacrificial death.

Peterson, noting the other place in the Lukan corpus besides Acts 20:28 where Luke teaches Christ's substitutionary atonement. Luke 22:19 and 20. Peterson strikes the nail squarely on the head quote, although many commentators seek to avoid the implication that Christ's death is presented here as the price paid for redeeming his people.

So, the verb, very costly, boy, oh my, in combination with the expression, dear to high matters to you, surely means acquired by means of the blood. He continues Jesus' atoning work in Luke 22 and Acts 20 is not simply the basis for the proclamation of forgiveness but also for the forming and maintaining of the eschatological people of God because it is a purchase. God buys people.

He purchases them for himself, buying them out of the slavery of sin, setting them free to belong to him, to love him, and to do his will. Paul then gives an urgent warning that comports with many passages in his epistles. Acts 20:29.

I know that after my departure, fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock. Acts 20:29. Luke uses strong language, calling false teachers savage wolves, not in hyperbole, but to alert the leaders of the Ephesian churches of the appalling results of heresy.

Paul's next words shock us, for he says, and from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things to draw away the disciples after them. Acts 20:30. Is he predicting that some of the very elders in his presence will defect from the faith and become false teachers? Or is his statement more general, pointing toward those in leadership positions in the churches? Larkin in his Acts Commentary pages 98 to 99 aptly notes that quote in Revelation two, one through seven, there are reports of heresies occurrence in Ephesus.

Revelation two, one through seven in the letter to the church at Ephesus among the seven church letters to the seven churches in Revelation two and three, there's a condemnation of false teaching at Ephesus by Jesus, the Lord of the church. It is difficult to know, but either way, this prediction underlines the dire need for the elders to be vigilant, to detect and reject errors in themselves or others. When Paul was with the Ephesian churches for three years, he often warned the leaders to be on the lookout for false teachers.

Now, knowing they will not see him again, he calls them to alertness. Verse 31. Therefore, be alert.

Remembering that for three years, I did not cease night or day to admonish every one of you with tears. Paul has fulfilled his ministry to the Ephesians in his presence and is now in a final meeting and warning. However, he knows that their perseverance does not ultimately depend on his faithfulness, but on God's.

For this reason, he urges in verse 32. Now I commend you to God and to the word of his grace, which is able to build you up and to give you the inheritance among all those who are sanctified. Here's Paul's confidence for success in ministry, God, and his word.

God uses the scriptures to sanctify believers and to give them the inheritance promised to the sons and daughters of a living God, eternal life in resurrected bodies on the new earth. Paul again asserts his innocence, this time from coveting others' money or possessions and commitment to work to provide for himself and the weak. Verses 33 and 34.

He quotes a previously unrecorded dominical saying, quote, it is more blessed to give than to receive. Verse 35. After Paul's moving farewell speech, he and the elders knelt and prayed as they all shed tears.

They then embraced, grieving that they would not see him again, and they accompanied him to the ship. Verse 38. Luke teaches much concerning the New Testament people of God through his summary of Paul's farewell words to the Ephesian presbyters.

God has appointed church leaders for his people, and both Paul's example and his charge to the Ephesians teach much about church leadership. Ultimately, the Holy Spirit appoints overseers, Acts 20:28, and Paul speaks to both their character and function. They are to imitate Paul, who displayed faithfulness to God, diligence and wisdom in ministry, humility, a lack of avarice, and a willingness to support himself and even others.

Verses 33 and 34. They, like the apostle, are to teach God's people and be involved in their lives. Verse 20.

Paul warns of savage wolves who will ravage the flock if its leaders don't stop them. Verse 29. They are to follow Paul's advice to Titus when Paul said an overseer must hold to the faithful message as taught.

Acts, I mean Titus 1:9. An overseer must hold firm to the trustworthy word as taught so that he may be able to give instruction in sound doctrine. That is the elder's delight, the teaching elder's delight, but it's not his only job. He must hold firm to the trustworthy word as taught that he may be able to give instruction in sound doctrine and also to rebuke those who contradict it.

The elders are to do what Paul later tells Timothy. Pay close attention to your life and your teaching. 1 Timothy 4:16.

This is urgent because the apostle predicted that from the Ephesian church leadership, heretics would arise. Verse 30. New Testament believers belong to the church of God, which he purchased with his own blood.

Verse 28. They formerly were slaves of sin and Satan, but Christ redeemed them with his atoning death to free them from bondage. As a result, they enjoy Christian freedom and belong to him who purchased them.

Church members need encouragement, which Paul supplies in heavy doses in this speech. They are to follow the apostle's example and verse 24 to testify to the gospel of the grace of God. This involves communicating the whole counsel of God.

Verse 27. The whole plan of God, including Christ's work of redemption. Verse 28.

They are to follow the spirit's leading, walk by faith, and preach grace. They're to follow the spirit's leading, walk by faith, and preach grace. Their assurance for fruitful ministry does not reside in themselves but in God and his word.

Verse 32. Marshall reminds Christian ministers of their posture with regard to the word. Marshall, Acts 335, 337 says it so well.

Paul and Luke know nothing of the idea that church leaders stand over the word committed to them. 2 Timothy 1:14. And are in control of it.

On the contrary, they stand under the word. Close quote. God forgives his people through Christ's redemption.

Verse 28 sanctifies them and gives them a heavenly inheritance as his children. Verse 32. I commend you to God and to the word of his grace, which is able to build you up and to give you the inheritance among all those who are sanctified.

New Testament believers must be willing to suffer as their Lord and his apostles suffered, including Paul in the past and future. In Acts 20:19 and Acts 20:22 and 23, respectively. Sri Lankan evangelist Fernando helpfully reminds us that this passage contributes to Luke's theology of suffering.

Fernando cites three lessons on suffering for Christians from Acts 20. One, Christians take on suffering that they can easily avoid because of their commitment to the glorious gospel of Christ, a cause that makes suffering worthwhile. Two, people will be motivated to suffer for the gospel when they see their leaders suffer for it.

Third, leaders not only suffer for the gospel, but they suffer for those whom they lead. I just Fernando acts the NIV application commentary. It is a unique commentary series that's honored and puts out an IV application commentary.

They have chosen people who have published academic commentaries on the books of the Bible that they then write NIV application commentaries for, but they take, so they summarize without going into great detail with the Greek, for example, they summarize the message of the paragraphs in the books that they're dealing with, but then they devote considerable time and space to the application of that message to people's lives. NIV application commentary. My wife has taught, my wife Mary Pat has taught ladies Bible studies for many, many years, and finds that commentary series most helpful in what she does.

In our next lecture, we will finish up my own survey of the people of God in Acts by looking at the very last chapter.

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