

Exploring Acts

The Continuing Ministry of Jesus Christ
Through the Holy Spirit

Lesson 13

Day One: Only God Can Change the Rules

Acts 15 is a sublime chapter for the majority of Christians in the world with no Jewish heritage or lineage that can be traced back through the Old Testament. We Gentiles are descended from races and backgrounds having no connection to the nation of Israel's promise of salvation; but we are none-the-less *chosen*, heirs of salvation through the New Covenant in Christ. This was preached by those first century missionaries like Paul and Barnabas, and affirmed by the mouth of Peter: "God chose among us, that by my mouth the Gentiles should hear the word of the gospel and believe" (15:7).

The words penned by Luke here confirm what we believers already know by faith—that our salvation is a gift of God and our spiritual transformation is the result of the Holy Spirit at work within us. Our flesh in us wants to add something to our salvation so that we feel we have a part in it, but the Bible teaches that the sum total of our righteousness is like filthy rags (Isaiah 64:6a). In other words, even on our best days we cannot merit being saved. There is nothing we can do to make God love us any more than He already does and there is nothing we can do to cause Him to love us any less. His love is perfect, ours is imperfect; but the love of Christ indwelling us through the Spirit not only makes us His, it also makes us become *like Him*.

Read Acts 15:1–41.

Open your Bible and lesson each day by beginning with a word of prayer. Come to your time of study expectant to receive something from the Lord. Write down your first impressions.

Memory verse: Ephesians 2:8–9 Write out the verse; repeat it each day to commit it to memory.

*For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves;
it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast.*

What we see happening in Acts 15, is that legalistic Christians from Judea were spreading a false message that a person had to keep the rites and traditions of the Jewish forefathers in order to be accepted into the faith. Essentially they were teaching that you must first become a Jew before becoming a Christian.

1. Look back at Acts 10:44–48. What had disproved that circumcision was not a prerequisite to salvation?

2. How had Peter convinced those in Jerusalem that God had granted salvation to the Gentiles? Acts 11:17–18.

It's interesting to note that the date of Paul's letter to the Galatians (churches in the region of Antioch, Iconium, Lystra and Derbe) is uncertain, prompting many commentators to agree that it was written prior to the council of Jerusalem. If so, that would mean that Paul was writing to counteract the situation being considered here in Acts 15.

Deeper Discoveries ~

Today we'll look closer at a portion of Paul's letter in Galatians 5:1–6, dealing with Christian liberty and the snare of returning to a yoke of bondage through works of the flesh. If this exercise is challenging for you, just do your best to determine the lesson in each verse below and an application to daily life. Put the application in the form of a personal question. (Ask your group leader for assistance.)

v. 1: _____

Vv. 2–3: _____

v. 4: _____

Vv. 5–6 _____

Day Two: The Jerusalem Council

Read Acts 15:1–21 for review.

In verses 6–21, Luke describes several meetings that took place within this conference dealing with the central issue of circumcision. Peter must have been sitting silently by listening and waiting for the Spirit to direct him to speak.

1. What, again, does Peter remind them that God had him do? v. 7

- a. He reiterated the proof that they were truly born again—what was it? Vv. 8–9

- b. What were the legalists trying to do that Peter was clearly refuting? v. 10

Paul apparently did not enter into the debate on this occasion, he let Peter handle the heavy lifting. But in verse 12, Luke does mention that Barnabas and Paul offered more documentation to the argument. We notice that Barnabas is mentioned first in order, meaning perhaps that he still held the prominent position in the Judean churches in terms of influence.

2. How did Barnabas and Paul attest to the acceptance of the Gentiles? v. 12

3. When it was James' turn to share, what did he state they should not do and what should they ask of the Gentiles? Vv. 19–21

Although this section of scripture is a difficult one to understand, the point that stands out is that believers must keep the main thing the main thing, which is we are saved by the work of God's grace through Christ; not by keeping the law nor by our own efforts. The Word of God going forth, the gift of the Holy Spirit, and the working of signs and miracles all were evidence that God was guiding and fulfilling His plan.

4. Personal: Have you ever known a moment when you doubted your salvation because you've looked at it in light of your weaknesses and realized you're not good enough? Look again at this week's memory verse in Ephesians 2:8–9 in light of what you're learning. What does it mean to you to be saved by grace?

Day Three:

The Letter

Read Acts 15:22–35 for review.

The leaders and elders present at the meeting threw their support behind James' recommendation and a letter was drafted to be sent by a delegation affirming the unity of the conference decision.

1. Think about the purpose of the letter and strategy of the delegation and write your thoughts below.

2. Who is commended for risking their lives and how would this validate the message?

3. Who are the new names introduced to confirm the counsel's agreement?

4. How was the news received by the multitude of believers in Antioch?

5. In your own words, state how Judas and Silas fulfilled their part of the mission.

6. What did Paul and Barnabas do? Why was this important?

The Christian leadership of this early church exhibited a loving concern for their mission that overruled their own differences and even their personal biases. They took a step of faith that was essential for the future success of evangelizing the Gentiles. It was a turning point—one that allowed procedures and protocols to be established that afforded everyone the opportunity to receive the gospel without any restrictions attached.

7. Personal: Are *you* perhaps a leader in your church fellowship? What does the model in Acts 15 teach you about the necessity of maintaining integrity in your leadership? How can the church be adversely affected if you don't regard it as a priority?

Day Four: The Parting of Brothers

Read Acts 15:36–41 for review.

Now Barnabas was determined . . . but Paul insisted . . . then the contention became so sharp that they parted from one another. Thankfully the details of the apostles lives are not concealed from us, they recorded for our benefit. Paul and Barnabas were both justified in thinking that the matter concerning John Mark was not a small one; each needed to allow conscience to have its way. We note that scripture does not affix blame on either man, and no doubt the peace and joy of both men became clouded by this unfortunate eipsode.

The word *contention* (v. 39) is a strong one, denoting “an access.” Luke uses it here in its common medical sense, meaning it is the equivalent to a long term disease taking a turn for the worse, and heightening into its severest form when manifested. It is comparable to the English word *paraoxysm*, which by definition is a “violent access of feeling or of rage or of convulsion.” In other words, after a long term uncomfortable feeling about it and ongoing discussions regarding the differences, neither Paul nor Barnabas cooled down; their anger broke out into such an acute form that they consequently separated.

- 1. Personal: Has there ever been a time in your life when you severed a relationship over a difference of opinioin? Briefly state the facts.

- a. Were you ultimately able to determine the cause of your differences and work through them?

- b. Regardless of the outcome, what lessons did you learn from the painful experience?

Realizing the fallibility of men and women in the Bible helps us to hold up the mirror and recognize our own shortcomings and learn from our differences. Hopefully, we do not allow the gospel message or work of the ministry to become secondary to our own feelings and actions.

- 2. Take a moment to meditate on the words found in Paul’s letter to the Colossians 3:12–16, and consider the following . . .

- a. When you have a disagreement or complaint against another, what should you do? Why is this important?

- b. What is the “above all these things” important action to remember? How can you best achieve this goal?

And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to His purpose. (Rom. 8:28)

Day Five: Selah . . . Pause and Ponder the Week in Review

This section of the lesson is intended to be an at-a-glance, user-friendly recap of what you've learned this week. Go back over your lesson with a marking pen or highlighter and mark what stands out to you. Use the margins to make personal notations. Be sure to indicate which points or questions you'd like to share in your discussion group.

1. What is your take-away-truth? How are you working to make it a part of your daily walk?

2. Write out this week's verse from memory.

3. What does this week's verse reveal to you?

4. Personal: Compose a prayer of thanksgiving for God's gift of salvation to you.

Prayer Time: Write down the people in your group to keep in prayer this next week.
