

The Acts of the Apostles

Acts 15:1–21 — Week 24

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Introduction — The Jerusalem Council: Defending the Gospel of Grace

Acts 15 represents one of the most significant theological turning points in the history of the Early Church. Between Paul's first and second missionary journeys, the Church confronts a fundamental question concerning salvation and the New Covenant:

Must Gentiles become Jewish through circumcision and obedience to the Law of Moses before they can be accepted by God?

The controversy challenges the very nature of salvation (soteriology), the identity of God's covenant people, and the freedom believers receive through Jesus Christ.

The apostles and elders gather in Jerusalem to address this dispute, ultimately establishing a theological foundation for the inclusion of Gentiles in the New Covenant community.

Three major themes emerge:

- Salvation and acceptance by God come through faith in Jesus Christ, not through the works of the Law.
- The Holy Spirit confirms God's acceptance of Gentiles through supernatural manifestations and transformed lives.
- The New Covenant establishes a community united by grace, faith, and holiness rather than ethnic identity or ceremonial requirements.

Romans 2:28–29 provides an important foundation: true covenant identity involves a circumcision of the heart by the Spirit rather than merely an outward physical act.

Acts 15:1–2 — The First Major Theological Controversy

The Controversy Begins in Antioch

Antioch has become the apostolic hub of revival and the launching point for Paul's missionary journeys.

However, certain men from Judea arrive teaching that Gentiles cannot be saved unless they are circumcised according to the Law of Moses.

Their position is essentially:

To enter the New Covenant, Gentiles must first become members of the Old Covenant through circumcision.

This argument draws upon Exodus 12:48 and the traditional understanding of Israel's covenant identity.

The Gospel of Grace Is Challenged

Paul and Barnabas strongly oppose this teaching because it contradicts the gospel they have been proclaiming throughout their missionary journey.

The controversy challenges several truths already demonstrated in Acts:

- God accepted Cornelius and his household through faith.
- The Holy Spirit fell upon uncircumcised Gentiles.
- Gentiles experienced salvation, miracles, and the presence of God without first becoming Jewish.
- Jesus fulfilled the requirements of the Old Covenant and established the New Covenant through His death and resurrection.

The Church Seeks Apostolic Resolution

Because this controversy threatens the unity and theological foundation of the Church, Paul and Barnabas are sent to Jerusalem to consult the apostles and elders.

The Jerusalem Council becomes a defining moment for establishing the doctrine of salvation by grace through faith.

Supporting Scriptures: Ephesians 2:12–17; Romans 2:28–29; Galatians 2:16; Colossians 3:11–12; Romans 11:17.

Talking Point: Whenever religious requirements are added as conditions for receiving God's acceptance, the freedom and sufficiency of the gospel are compromised.

Acts 15:3–4 — Testimonies of Gentile Salvation

As Paul and Barnabas travel toward Jerusalem, they pass through Phoenicia and Samaria, sharing reports of Gentile conversions.

Their testimonies bring great joy to the believers.

The Church Celebrates God's Grace

These reports demonstrate that many Christian communities already recognize God's work among the Gentiles.

The testimonies also reveal an important pattern in Acts:

When God moves beyond familiar religious and cultural boundaries, healthy believers celebrate His goodness rather than resist His activity.

Upon arriving in Jerusalem, Paul and Barnabas report what God has accomplished through their ministry.

Talking Point: Testimonies of God's activity should strengthen the Church's faith and expand its understanding of His redemptive purposes.

Acts 15:5 — The Pharisee Believers Raise an Objection

Some believers from the party of the Pharisees insist that Gentile Christians must be circumcised and commanded to keep the Law of Moses.

These men believed in Jesus but continued interpreting covenant membership through the requirements of the Old Covenant.

The Central Question

The debate is not simply about circumcision.

It concerns who belongs to God's covenant community and what makes someone acceptable to Him.

The notes identify this as an expression of religious legalism that complicates access to God by adding requirements beyond faith in Jesus Christ.

Talking Point: Religious tradition can become a barrier to spiritual freedom when it is elevated above the completed work of Jesus Christ.

Acts 15:6–11 — Peter Defends Salvation by Grace

The apostles and elders gather to consider the matter.

Peter reminds them of his experience with Cornelius in Acts 10.

The Holy Spirit Is the Evidence

Peter explains that God accepted the Gentiles by giving them the Holy Spirit.

This occurred without circumcision or adherence to the ceremonial requirements of the Law.

The Holy Spirit fell sovereignly upon Cornelius and his household.

God Himself demonstrated that Gentiles were acceptable to Him through faith in Jesus.

God Makes No Distinction

Peter emphasizes that God purified their hearts by faith.

He then challenges those who would impose the Law upon Gentile believers.

The Law had become a burden that neither their ancestors nor they themselves had been able to bear perfectly.

Salvation Through Grace

Peter concludes that both Jews and Gentiles are saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Romans 8:3–4 reinforces this truth: what the Law could not accomplish because of human weakness, God accomplished through His Son.

Talking Point: The Holy Spirit confirms the sufficiency of Jesus Christ. Salvation is not earned through religious performance but received through God's grace by faith.

Acts 15:12 — Signs and Wonders Confirm God's Acceptance

Paul and Barnabas now testify about the miraculous signs and wonders God performed among the Gentiles during their first missionary journey.

Their testimony provides another important dimension of the theological argument.

Supernatural Power Confirms the Gospel

The miracles demonstrate that God was actively partnering with their ministry among the Gentiles.

The Gentiles were receiving God's supernatural activity without first submitting to the Law of Moses.

Galatians 3:5 reinforces this principle by asking whether God supplies the Spirit and works miracles through the works of the Law or through hearing with faith.

Experience and Theology

The Jerusalem Council considers both the testimony of God's supernatural activity and the truth of Scripture.

Talking Point: Sound theology must account for the revealed Word of God and the authentic activity of the Holy Spirit. God's supernatural work confirms the gospel of grace rather than adding new requirements for salvation.

Acts 15:13–18 — James Interprets God's Work Through Scripture

James, the brother of Jesus, emerges as the principal leader guiding the Jerusalem Council toward its conclusion.

James was widely respected for his righteousness, devotion to prayer, and leadership in the Jerusalem Church.

God Is Concerned for All People

James acknowledges Peter's testimony and emphasizes that God has acted to bring Gentiles into His covenant community.

This reveals the consistent goodness of God toward humanity.

The Restoration of David's Fallen Tent

James quotes Amos 9:11–12, connecting the inclusion of the Gentiles with God's promise to restore David's fallen tent.

The Davidic promise, rooted in 2 Samuel 7, finds its fulfillment in Jesus Christ.

Through Messiah, the nations are invited into God's redemptive purposes.

Scripture Confirms the Mission

James demonstrates that Gentile inclusion is not a new idea or a departure from God's purposes.

It is the fulfillment of what God had already revealed through the prophets.

Talking Point: God's intention has always been to bless the nations through His covenant promises. Jesus fulfills those promises and opens the way for all peoples to become part of God's family.

Acts 15:19–21 — The Apostolic Decree

James now offers his judgment concerning Gentile believers.

His conclusion is clear:

The Church should not make it difficult for Gentiles who are turning to God.

The Gentiles are not required to become Jewish through circumcision or ceremonial obedience to the Law of Moses.

However, James identifies four practices from which Gentile believers should abstain.

1. Food Polluted by Idols

Believers are instructed to separate themselves from idolatrous practices.

Idolatry directly contradicts their confession that Jesus Christ is Lord.

The New Covenant calls believers to exclusive worship and devotion to the Living God.

Supporting Scriptures: Leviticus 26:1; 1 Corinthians 8.

Talking Point: Grace brings freedom, but that freedom does not include participation in worship that contradicts our allegiance to Jesus Christ.

2. Sexual Immorality — PORNEIA

The Greek word porneia refers broadly to illicit sexual activity.

The notes emphasize the importance of sexual purity as an expression of covenant faithfulness.

Christian sexuality is understood as reflecting the faithfulness, holiness, and covenant love of Christ toward His Church.

Supporting Scriptures: Ephesians 5:3; 1 Corinthians 6:18; Colossians 3:5.

Talking Point: Holiness is not a means of earning salvation. It is an expression of our new identity and relationship with Jesus Christ.

3. Meat from Strangled Animals

The decree instructs Gentile believers to abstain from meat taken from strangled animals.

This instruction is connected in the notes to the reverence for life established through God's covenant with Noah.

4. Blood

The prohibition concerning blood also recalls Genesis 9:4–6.

Blood represents life, and the instruction emphasizes honoring the sacredness of life given by God.

Freedom and Responsibility

The Apostolic Decree preserves two important truths:

- Gentiles are fully accepted into God's covenant community through faith in Jesus Christ.
- Christian freedom is expressed through holiness, devotion to God, and conduct that honors life and covenant relationships.

The Council therefore protects the gospel from legalism while providing practical guidance for the growing multicultural Church.

Talking Point: The New Covenant does not eliminate moral responsibility. Rather, it establishes a new relationship with God in which holiness flows from grace, love, and the transforming presence of the Holy Spirit.

Major Themes of Acts 15:1–21

- The gospel of grace must be protected. Salvation cannot be made dependent upon religious requirements that Jesus has already fulfilled.
- Faith in Christ establishes covenant identity. God's people are defined by their relationship with Jesus rather than ethnicity or ceremonial observance.
- The Holy Spirit confirms God's acceptance. Cornelius and the Gentile believers demonstrate that God welcomes people through faith.
- Signs and wonders provide testimony to God's activity. Supernatural manifestations supported the apostles' proclamation of grace.
- Scripture and the Holy Spirit work together. James connects the experiences of Peter, Paul, and Barnabas with the prophetic promises of Scripture.
- God's redemptive purposes include all nations. The restoration of David's fallen tent points toward the global reach of Messiah's Kingdom.
- Apostolic leadership protects theological unity. The Jerusalem Council demonstrates the importance of resolving doctrinal controversies through prayerful, collective leadership.
- Christian freedom is not moral lawlessness. Grace brings believers into a life of holiness and covenant faithfulness.
- The New Covenant creates one family. Jews and Gentiles are welcomed into God's people through Jesus Christ.
- God's heart is to remove unnecessary barriers. The Church must not complicate people's access to the Father through religious burdens.

Discussion Questions

1. Grace Versus Religious Performance

The Jerusalem Council confronted a teaching that required Gentiles to fulfill Old Covenant requirements before they could be accepted by God. What religious traditions, expectations, or personal beliefs might Christians today unintentionally elevate into requirements for God's acceptance? How can we protect the freedom of the gospel while still valuing holiness?

2. The Holy Spirit and Theological Discernment

Peter, Paul, and Barnabas testified about the Holy Spirit's activity among the Gentiles, while James demonstrated how these experiences aligned with Scripture. What can we learn from the Jerusalem Council about developing sound theology that honors both the authority of Scripture and the authentic supernatural ministry of the Holy Spirit?

3. Freedom, Holiness, and Christian Community

James' decree removed unnecessary religious burdens while maintaining clear expectations concerning idolatry, sexual morality, and reverence for life. How can the Church today cultivate communities that celebrate the freedom of God's grace while encouraging personal holiness, spiritual maturity, and loving relationships across cultural differences?