

“Freedom from Expectations”

Devotional Reading: Acts 17:22-34 **Background Scripture:** Acts 15:1-21

Acts 15:1–11 (NIV)

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.”

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.”

LESSON AIMS

- **Learning Fact:** To outline conflicting perspectives on certain doctrines in the early church.
- **Biblical Principle:** To describe the core of the gospel message of salvation by grace.
- **Daily Application:** To resolve any disputes while staying faithful to the gospel.

WORD TO KNOW

Doctrine: A belief (or system of beliefs) accepted as authoritative by some group or school.

Introduction

Steps to Resolve Disputes

Conflict management is not a new practice. Sometimes people resolve conflict through conversation, debate, and allowances. Resorting to stonewalling, avoidance, or even advancing the conflict to a court of law can do little to reconcile those who find themselves in dispute.

One method (of many) to resolve conflict involves three steps. First, the parties in dispute are to be identified. Second, both sides must clearly understand the nature of their conflict. Third, the involved parties’ shared values or common ground should be recognized. When mediators address these steps, an agreement that serves the interests of all conflicting parties can be reached.

The lesson involves a conflict between parties of the first-century church. The Christian movement was just beginning, and believers had to work out conflicting perspectives on certain doctrines. The resolution in Acts 15 sets an important precedent for the church and the identity of the people of God.

LESSON CONTEXT: First-Century Judaism

Most of Jesus’ earliest followers were Jewish, and they still participated in many of the practices of Judaism. For example, until the destruction of the Jerusalem temple in A.D. 70, Jewish followers of Jesus participated in some of the temple’s ceremonies (examples: Acts 3:1; 21:26). Additionally, throughout the Roman Empire, Jewish believers continued to participate in the synagogues (example: 17:1–2). Jews gathered in these buildings for worship and teaching from the Scriptures.

Some Gentiles had become highly regarded within their local Jewish communities, partly because of their support of synagogues (example: Luke 7:1–10). The book of Acts mentions one such individual: Cornelius, a Gentile who “feared God” (Acts 10:1–2, 22). There is no indication that these Gentiles took up the requirements of Judaism. As a result, they were not considered “fellow children of Abraham” (13:26).

There were, however, some Gentiles who chose to convert fully to Judaism. These converts were called “proselytes” (see Acts 13:43; compare 6:5). Male proselytes were required to be circumcised—a painful, even dangerous, surgical procedure in the days of rudimentary anesthetics and no antibiotics. Circumcision was the sign of the covenant between God and Abraham (see Genesis 17:9–14; compare Exodus 12:48). During the first century A.D., some individuals had been teaching that Gentile followers of Jesus needed to be circumcised according to the Law of Moses (see Galatians 6:12–13). The reasoning for this position was that Israel had always been the distinct people of God. It was to Israel that

God had revealed Himself, given His law, and specified circumcision as the sign of His covenant. This group assumed that if God were making himself known to the nations, then the nations should be circumcised according to the Law of Moses.

LESSON CONTEXT: The Jerusalem Council

The book of Acts was written by Luke. Acts is the second of a two-volume work by Luke addressed to Theophilus (Acts 1:1; see Luke 1:1–4).

Prior to the events in this lesson, Paul and Barnabas, leaders of the first-century church, had been traveling throughout Asia Minor (modern-day Turkey). These travels are identified as Paul's first missionary journey in A.D. 47–49 (Acts 13:4–14:28). The two visited various synagogues, where they taught from the Scriptures and preached the news of Jesus' resurrection (example: 13:32–33). They were not selective in choosing their audience; they preached to both Jews and Gentiles (see 14:1).

After their journeys, Paul and Barnabas returned to Antioch (Acts 14:26–27), a city in modern-day Syria (not to be confused with another Antioch located in Pisidia; see 13:14). Antioch in Syria was located approximately 330 miles north of Jerusalem.

The events of Acts 15:4–29 depict a meeting sometimes called the "Jerusalem Council." This meeting took place in approximately A.D. 51. The council was an early attempt to answer the vital question of how to incorporate Gentiles into the people of God. The church's future depended on how the council answered this question.

Conflict Described: Acts 15:1–3

The relation between the Jewish and Gentile believers in terms of admission to membership in the church was the issue of the discussion. In the beginning, the church consisted almost entirely of converted Jews who had automatically been circumcised as Old Testament believers. Even Peter, earlier, had difficulty making the transition to full fellowship with the Gentiles. The establishment of a predominantly Gentile church in Antioch and now the success of the Gentile mission in Galatia refocused attention upon fellowship with these growing churches. Church growth certainly underlies the basic themes represented by Luke in the book of Acts. The power of the message of the gospel is demonstrated by the fact that it gains reception and response almost everywhere. However, when the Jewish converts from Judea arrived in Antioch, they insisted that "you" be "*circumcised*" in order to "be saved" (v. 1). The text later indicates (v. 5) that these converts were from among the Pharisees, the strictest of the sect of the Jews. The disputations would also seem to indicate that some of the early believers still looked upon Christianity as a movement within Judaism at this point.

During the time between the Old and New Testaments, circumcision had become a boundary marker for Jewish identity. And the first-century church had not entirely abandoned the practice. For instance, the apostle Paul circumcised Timothy because of the context into which the two were traveling (see Acts 16:1–5). At another time, however, Paul did not require circumcision for his associate (see Galatians 2:3).

The issue at hand was not *if* Gentiles would be admitted into the people of God. The church had already celebrated God's work in Gentiles (example: Acts 11:1–18). Even the Old Testament prophets agreed that the incorporation of Gentiles into God's people would someday occur (examples: Isaiah 14:1; 56:6–7; Zechariah 8:23).

Instead, the issue and argument went as follows: since God provided the law, then all people—Gentiles included—must keep the law to *be saved*.

1. Who were these “certain people” stating that you had to be circumcised in order to “be saved” (Acts 15:1)?

Barnabas was the first to introduce *Paul* to the other apostles (see Acts 9:27). The two men had traveled together on a missionary journey throughout Asia Minor (13:4–14:28; see Lesson Context). The two were identified as “apostles” (14:14) and, therefore, leaders in the first-century church.

That Paul and Barnabas expressed *sharp dispute and debate with* the visitors and their proclamation is unsurprising. The believers in Antioch had heard of the faith of Gentiles (see Acts 14:26–27). But the interlopers’ message contradicted preaching from Paul and Barnabas regarding justification by faith and the limits of the Law of Moses (see 13:38–39).

When sincere Christians disagree, they must get together, see what God is doing in His church, and find out what the Word has to say about it. God gave Paul a revelation instructing him to take the whole matter to the Jerusalem church leaders (Gal. 2:2), and to this the Antioch assembly agreed (“they” in Acts 15:2).

2. What was Paul and Barnabas’ reaction to the issue? (Acts 15:2)

What Do You Think?

How should believers discern which doctrines are essential and which are nonessential? **Digging**

Deeper

How should believers handle disputes regarding nonessential doctrines?

Leaving *the church* in Antioch allowed Paul, Barnabas, and the others to visit churches en route to Jerusalem. The estimated 330 miles between the cities would have taken at least two weeks to travel on foot. Because of the trip’s length, the travelers probably relied on the hospitality of other believers in *Phenice and Samaria*. As the travelers proceeded through these regions, they proclaimed the news that God had welcomed *Gentiles* into His people, and this *made all the believers very glad*. And when the travelers made it to Jerusalem, *they were welcomed by the church and the apostles and elders, to whom they reported everything God had done through them*.

3. What did Paul and his entourage do along the route to Jerusalem? (Acts 15:3-4)

What Do You Think?

How will you tell the story of God’s work in your life as an act of encouragement to other believers?

Digging Deeper

Who will you tell your story to in the upcoming week?

Conflict Debated: Acts 15:4–6

There were objections by “believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees” (or Christian converts from among the Pharisees). It was difficult for these Pharisees now Christian to see that their glorious religious system, given by God, have been fulfilled in Christ and was now out of date. Rather than abandon it, they tried to blend the old religion with the new (Matthew 9:14-17). This conflict with the delegation from Antioch led to a formal conference of the “apostles and elders.” While the leaders were involved in the discussion, verses 12 and 22 show that the whole church participated in the ultimate decision.

4. Who objected to all this joy and grand reception? (Acts 15:5-6)

What Do You Think?

How should believers discern whether or not to bring in a mediator to help resolve a disagreement?

Digging Deeper

How would you respond to someone who says that believers should stifle disagreement altogether?

Conflict Resolved: Acts 15:7–11

Paul's earlier rebuke of Peter in Antioch (cf. Galatians 2:11) had taken effect. We get the impression that Peter sat patiently while the disputing ("questioning") was going on, waiting for the Spirit to direct him. "To answer before listening— that is folly and shame" (Prov. 18:13). Peter reminded the church of four important ministries that God had performed for the Gentiles, ministries in which he had played an important part.

First, God made a choice that Peter should preach the Gospel to the Gentiles (Acts 15:7). Jesus had given the keys of the kingdom to Peter (Matt. 16:19), and he had used them to open the door of faith to the Jews (Acts 2), the Samaritans (Acts 8:14-17), and the Gentiles (Acts 10). At this moment, perhaps Peter remembered his interactions with Cornelius, a Gentile who feared God (see Acts 10:1-2). After experiencing a vision (10:9-16), Peter went to the house of Cornelius and preached the message of Jesus' anointing and resurrection (see 10:23-43). Note that Peter made it clear that Cornelius and his household were saved by hearing and believing, not by obeying the Law of Moses.

Second, God gave the Holy Spirit to the Gentiles to bear witness that they truly were born again (verse 8 of today's lesson). Only God can see the human heart; so, if these people had not been saved, God would never have given them the Spirit (Rom. 8:9). But they did not receive the Spirit by keeping the Law, but by believing God's Word (Acts 10:43-46; see Gal. 3:2). Peter's message was "everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins" (Acts 10:43), not "whoever believes and obeys the Law of Moses."

5. Who boldly stood up before the crowd to speak? (Acts 15:7-10)

What Do You Think?

How will you continue living in a way that reflects the presence of God's Spirit? **Digging**

Deeper

What steps will you take to ensure that you are being attentive to the leading of God's Spirit?

Third, God erased a difference (Acts 15:9, 11). For centuries, God had put a difference between Jews and Gentiles, and it was the task of the Jewish religious leaders to protect and maintain that difference (Lev. 10:10; Ezek. 22:26; 44:23). Ever since the work of Christ on Calvary, God has made no difference between Jews and Gentiles as far as sin (Rom. 3:9, 22) or salvation (Rom. 10:9-13) are concerned. Sinners can have their hearts purified only by faith in Christ (verse 9 of today's lesson); salvation is not by keeping the Law.

God's fourth ministry—and this was Peter's strongest statement—was the removing of the yoke of the Law (verse 10 of today's lesson). The Law was indeed a yoke that burdened the Jewish nation, but that yoke has been taken away by Jesus Christ (see Matt. 11:28-30; Gal. 5:1; Col. 2:14-17). After all, the Law was given to the Jewish nation to protect them from the evils of the Gentile world and prepare them to bring the Messiah into the world (Gal. 4:1-7). The Law cannot purify the sinner's heart (Gal. 2:21), impart the gift of the Holy Spirit (Gal. 3:2), or give eternal life (Gal. 3:21). What the Law could not do, God did through His own Son (Rom. 8:1-4). Those who have trusted Christ have the righteousness of God's Law in their hearts and, through the Spirit, obey His will. They are not motivated by fear, but by love, for "love is the fulfillment of the Law" (Rom. 13:8-10).

Peter ended with a reminder of the core of the gospel. Salvation comes only *through* one avenue: by *the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ*. No human work, including following the Law of Moses, could

save a person (see Acts 13:38–39; Galatians 2:14–17).

We would expect Peter to conclude his defense by saying, “They [the Gentiles] are saved even as we Jews,” but he said just the reverse! “We [Jews] are saved, just as they are.”

Peter’s witness made a great impact on the congregation because they sat in silence after he was finished (v. 12, not in today’s text).

6. How did Peter conclude regarding the issue of circumcision? (Acts 15:11)

CONCLUSION Seeking

Resolution

People try to hide conflict by avoiding or ignoring it altogether. Maintaining a facade of peace regardless of the underlying discord can be a severe failure. Evading problems usually makes the conflict worse.

The leaders of the first-century church did not dodge conflict regarding the question of Gentile circumcision. Instead, they resolved the dispute while staying faithful to the gospel. God’s plan for salvation is beyond human expectations. We are saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and not through our heritage or achievements!

PRAYER

Dear God of salvation, thank You for showing Your mercy. Help us welcome as we have been welcomed and love as we have been loved. Show us how we can proclaim to others Your plan for salvation. In the name of Jesus. Amen.

THOUGHT TO REMEMBER

Celebrate God’s merciful gift of redemption!