

Saved by Grace

Acts 15:1-12

SS Lesson for 11/08/2015

Devotional Scripture: Eph 2:3-10

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Commentary from The Bible Knowledge Commentary

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From the NIV Standard Lesson Commentary

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Introduction

Overview and Key Verse of the Lesson

The lesson examines the blessing of Christians to be **Saved by Grace**. The **study's aim** is to understand why keeping the Law of Moses is unnecessary for salvation because of God's grace. The **study's application** is to participate in the furtherance of the gospel using lessons learned out of the lesson.

(Adapted from the NIV Standard Lesson Commentary)

Key Verse: Acts 15:8-9

8 So God, who knows the heart, acknowledged them by giving them the Holy Spirit, just as He did to us, 9 and made no distinction between us and them, purifying their hearts by faith.

Commentary from The Bible Knowledge Commentary

The **men who came down from Judea to Antioch** may well be the same ones referred to in Galatians 2:12. They insisted circumcision was essential for justification. Perhaps they based their theology on such passages as Genesis 17:14 and Exodus 12:48-49. At any rate, they were sure to cause a severe schism in the church, so their teaching **brought Paul and Barnabas into sharp dispute and debate with them**. The men from Judea were dogmatic in their doctrine in spite of the fact they had no authority from the church in Jerusalem. How they explained the case of Cornelius (Acts 10) or the work of Barnabas (11:22-24) is left unstated. Perhaps they felt Cornelius' case was unique and the believers in Antioch in chapter 11 were too insignificant to use as examples. Now the movement was becoming overwhelming and this was their way of protesting. The church at Antioch felt it was wise to discuss the matter with **the apostles and elders in Jerusalem**. So they commissioned **Paul and Barnabas** for the task and wisely sent **some other believers** along as witnesses. These witnesses would protect Paul and Barnabas against being accused of distorting the facts.

As the men in the delegation made **their way** to Jerusalem they reported the good **news of Gentile conversions** to the brethren in **Phoenicia and Samaria**. Once again the response of a believing church was joy! (cf. 2:46) Furthermore, **the church in Jerusalem** with its leaders **welcomed** Paul and Barnabas; this was scarcely the response of the antagonists. The issue was stated forth-rightly by **the believing Pharisees**. Significantly circumcision also involved keeping **the whole Old Testament Law** as Paul later wrote (Gal. 5:3). The method of justification ultimately determines the method of sanctification (cf. Col. 2:6). **The apostles and elders met to consider this question**. In addition many other believers were present (cf. vv. 12, 22). The problem was no small one; there was **much discussion** (*zētēsēos*, meaning "inquiry, debate, questioning"; trans. "debate" in v. 2; "controversies" in 1 Tim. 6:4; "arguments" in 2 Tim. 2:23 and Titus 3:9). **Peter** wisely permitted this to continue for a time lest the impression be given that the results were a foregone conclusion. The date of this council is generally taken to be A.D. 49. When Peter referred to God's **choice of Cornelius some time ago** he was looking back about 10 years (Acts 10:1-11:18). The issue of whether to accept **Gentiles** was settled then and there. This was evidenced, Peter said, because **God gave the Holy Spirit to them** (10:44-46) **just as He did to the Jews** (2:4; 11:15). So **God made no distinction between** believing Jews and Gentiles. All are accepted **by faith**. Requiring Gentiles to be circumcised to obey the Mosaic Law would have had two results: (a) the Jews would **test** (*peirazete*) **God** (cf. Deut. 6:16) and (b) they would put **on the necks of the disciples an unbearable yoke** (cf. Matt. 23:4). To "test" God is to see how far one can go with God (cf. Acts 5:9). Putting a yoke on the disciples' necks was an appropriate way to state the second result, for "taking the yoke" was used to describe Gentile proselytes coming into Judaism. It spoke of an obligation. In discussing the question Peter referred not only to Gentiles but also to all believers coming under the Law. The term "disciples" was used of both Jews and Gentiles. The statement, **We are saved, just as they are**, is amazing. A Jew under the Law would say the opposite and in reverse order ("they are saved as we are"), but one who knew

God's **grace**, as Peter did, would not say that. Salvation for anyone—Jew or Gentile—is by God's grace (v. 11) and is by faith (v. 9; cf. Gal. 2:16; Eph. 2:8).

Barnabas and Paul, who next addressed the assembly, described **the miraculous signs and wonders** (*sēmeia* and *terata*; cf. 2:43; 5:12; 6:8; 8:6, 13; 14:3) that **God had done among the Gentiles through them**. These would especially convince the Jews (cf. 1 Cor. 1:22) so **they listened** in silence. This response implied they would not argue against the testimonies of Peter, Paul, and Barnabas. **James**, evidently the head of the church at Jerusalem, then took the floor and issued a summary statement. He was Jesus' half brother and wrote the Epistle of James. He began by discussing Peter's experience (Acts 10). In referring to Peter as **Simon**, James used a name which would be logical in its setting in Jerusalem (actually the Gr. has *Symeōn*, an even more Jewish spelling, used only here and in 2 Peter 1:1 in the NT). The phrase **at first** is crucial because it affirmed that Paul and Barnabas were not the first to go to **the Gentiles**. As Peter had already said (Acts 15:7-11) the question had actually been settled in principle (chaps. 10-11) *before* Paul and Barnabas went on their first journey. Quite properly the council desired more than the testimony of experience. They wanted to know how it corresponded with the witness of the Scriptures. This was the ultimate test. To prove that Gentile salvation apart from circumcision was an Old Testament doctrine, James quoted from Amos 9:11-12. Several problems are involved in this quotation. One problem involves the text. James here quoted a text similar to the Septuagint (the Gr. OT) that differs from the Hebrew text. The Hebrew of Amos 9:12 may be translated, "That they may possess the remnant of Edom and all the nations who are called by My name." But James used the noun **of men** (or "of mankind"), not "Edom," and the verb **seek**, not "possess." The Hebrew consonants for "Edom" and for "Adam" are identical (*ḏm*). The confusion in the vowels (added much later) is easy to understand. The only distinction in the Hebrew between "possess" (*yāraš*) and "seek" (*ḏāraš*) is in one consonant. The text James used may well represent the original. Another problem, the major one, involves interpretation. What did Amos mean when he wrote these verses, and how did James use the passage? Several observations need to be noted before the passage is interpreted: (1) James did not say Amos 9:11-12 was *fulfilled* in the church; he simply asserted that what was happening in the church was **in full agreement** with the Old Testament **prophets**. (2) The word "prophets" is plural, implying that the quotation from Amos was representative of what the prophets in general affirmed. (3) James' main point is clear: Gentile salvation apart from the Law does not contradict the Old Testament prophets. (4) The words **After this** are neither in the Masoretic text nor the Septuagint; both have "in that day." Any interpretation of the passage must consider these factors.

Bible students interpret these verses in one of three ways. Those who hold to amillennial theology say the rebuilt house (*skēnēn*, "tent") of David is the church which God is using to preach to the Gentiles. While this view at first appears plausible, several factors oppose it. (1) The verb **return** (*anastrepsō*) used in Acts 15:16 means an actual return. Luke used it only in 5:22 ("went back") and here (he did not use it in his Gospel); in both occurrences it describes a literal, bodily return. Since God's Son has not yet returned bodily, this rebuilding has not taken place. (2) Christ's present ministry in heaven is not associated with the Davidic throne elsewhere in the New Testament. He is now seated at the right hand of God (Ps. 110:1; Rom. 8:34; Col. 3:1; Heb. 1:3; 8:1; 10:12; 12:2; 1 Peter 3:22). When He returns He will sit on David's throne (2 Sam. 7:16; Ps. 89:4; Matt. 19:28; 25:31). (3) The church was a mystery, a truth not revealed to Old Testament saints (Rom. 16:25; Eph. 3:5-6; Col. 1:24-27); so the church would not be referred to in Amos. A second view of the passage is commonly held by premillenarians. According to this view there are four chronological movements in this passage: the present Church Age ("taking from the Gentiles a people for Himself," Acts 15:14), the return of Christ to Israel (v. 16a), the establishing of the Davidic kingdom (v. 16b), and the turning of Gentiles to God (v. 17). While this does interpret these verses in a logical fashion, this approach has some difficulties. (1) The quotation begins with the words "After this." Premillenarians assert James used this phrase to suit his interpretation of the passage. But since the quotation begins with "after this" James must be quoting the sense of Amos 9:11. Therefore this phrase looks back, not to Acts 15:14, but to Amos 9:8-10, which describes the Tribulation ("a time of trouble for Jacob," Jer. 30:7). (2) If the temporal phrase "after this" refers to the present Age in Amos 9:11, Amos would then have predicted the church in the Old Testament. A third view, also premillennial, may be

more plausible. James simply asserted that Gentiles will be saved in the Millennium when Christ will return **and rebuild David's fallen tent**, that is, restore the nation Israel. Amos said nothing about Gentiles needing to be circumcised. Several factors support this interpretation: (1) This fits the purpose of the council. If Gentiles will be saved in the Kingdom Age (the Millennium), why should they become Jewish proselytes by circumcision in the Church Age? (2) This approach suits the meaning of "in that day" in Amos 9:11. After the Tribulation (Amos 9:8-10) God will establish the messianic kingdom (Amos 9:11-12). James (Acts 15:16) interpreted "in that day" to mean that "at the time when" God does one (the Tribulation) He will then do the other. In that sense James could say "After this." (3) This interpretation gives significance to the word "first" in verse 14. Cornelius and his household were among the first Gentiles to become members of Christ's body, the church. Gentile salvation will culminate in great blessing for them in the Millennium (cf. Rom. 11:12). (4) A number of prophets predicted Gentile salvation in the Millennium, as James stated in Acts 15:15 (e.g., Isa. 42:6; 60:3; Mal. 1:11).

As a result of this theological discussion James set forth a practical decision. **It** was his considered **judgment** (*krinō*, lit., "I judge") that the church **should not make it difficult** (*parenochlein*, "to annoy"; used only here in the NT) **for the Gentiles**. This parallels in thought the sentiments of Peter expressed in verse 10. **Instead** (*alla*, "but," a strong adversative conjunction) James suggested they draft a letter affirming an ethic which would not offend those steeped in the Old Testament. The Gentiles were **to abstain from** three items: (a) **food polluted by idols**, (b) **sexual immorality**, and (c) **the meat of strangled animals and... blood**. Many Bible teachers say these are only ceremonial matters. The food polluted by idols is explained in verse 29 as "food sacrificed to idols" (cf. 21:25). This then, it is argued, looks at the same problem Paul discussed (1 Cor. 8-10). The abstinence from sexual immorality is explained as referring to the marriage laws of Leviticus 18:6-20. The prohibition against eating blood is taken to refer to Leviticus 17:10-14. All three prohibitions according to this interpretation look back to the Jewish *ceremonial* Law. However, it seems better to take these as moral issues. The reference to food polluted by idols should be taken in the sense of Revelation 2:14, 20. It was a usual practice among Gentiles to use an idol's temple for banquets and celebrations. Paul also condemned the practice of Christians participating in these (1 Cor. 10:14-22). Fornication was such a common sin among the Gentiles that it was an accepted practice. The problem of immorality even persisted among Christians all too often, as is witnessed by the New Testament injunctions against it (cf. 1 Cor. 6:12-18, where Paul was evidently answering arguments in favor of immorality). The third prohibition goes back further than Leviticus 17; it looks back to Genesis 9, where God established the Noahic Covenant, a "contract" still in effect today. There God gave people the privilege of eating flesh but the blood was to be drained from it. All three prohibitions in Acts 15:20 are best taken in an ethical or moral sense. If this be so, they are still the responsibility of Christians today, even to the point of not eating blood sausage and raw meat. By not attending temple banquets, or being involved in fornication, or eating meat with blood in it, the Gentile Christians would be maintaining high moral standards and would keep from offending their Jewish brothers. There were Jews in every city who would be offended by Christians not following these strictures. These Israelites were well acquainted with these moral issues. **The whole church** (cf. v. 12) was permitted to express itself on this issue. Interestingly two witnesses were delegated to attend **Paul and Barnabas** for the protection of both sides (v. 2). They would "confirm by word of mouth" what was written (v. 27). No one could claim there were poor communications about this delicate issue. **Silas** was one of these **two men**. This is in keeping with Luke's style of bringing someone on the scene unobtrusively who later becomes a main character (cf. v. 40). These two **leaders**, also "prophets" (v. 32), may have represented two groups in the Jerusalem church—**Judas**, probably a brother of Joseph (cf. 1:23), for the Hebrew section; and Silas, a Roman citizen (cf. 16:37), for the Hellenists. The **letter**, sent by **the apostles and elders**, confirmed the findings of the council. The church's admiration for **Barnabas and Paul** is evidenced by the words **our dear friends** and their acknowledging that Paul and Barnabas had **risked their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ** (cf. 13:50; 14:5, 19). Significantly the letter referred to **the Holy Spirit** as the "Prime Mover" in this discernment of truth.

Lesson Introduction and Background

From the NIV Standard Lesson Commentary

The Jerusalem Council was convened in about AD 51, some 20 years after the resurrection of Jesus and the birth of the church on the Day of Pentecost. Much had happened in those two decades, and a focus of the book of Acts is the expansion of Christianity beyond the Jewish people. Many Gentiles were at least tolerated by Jews with whom they interacted. Some Gentiles, like the centurion of Luke 7:1-10, had established positive relationships with local synagogues. But while such Gentiles might be seen as friends of the synagogue, and even recognized as “devout” or “God-fearers” (see the Lesson Background of lesson 7), they were not considered to be “children of Abraham” by Jews (Acts 13:26; contrast Galatians 3:7). There were also Gentiles who chose to embrace Judaism fully; these were converts (Acts 6:5; 13:43). Male converts were required to be circumcised—a painful, even dangerous surgical procedure in the days of rudimentary anesthetics and no antibiotics. They were also expected to keep the Law of Moses, not least of which were the dietary laws. Both of these were big issues for Gentiles. No adult male would easily agree to be circumcised, and pork was a favorite meat of the Greeks and Romans, preferred by some over beef or mutton (compare Deuteronomy 14:8). The book of Acts records the advance of the church geographically, and this had implications for the nature of its membership. The first Christians—the 3,000 baptized on the Day of Pentecost—were all Jews and converts to Judaism (Acts 2:5, 11). The gospel then spread to Samaria (8:5). The Samaritans were not full-blood Jews and did not worship at the Jerusalem temple (John 4:20-22; also see the Lesson Background to lesson 5), but they practiced circumcision and kept the food laws, so that was not much of a stretch. But then Peter was impelled by the Holy Spirit to preach to and baptize the Roman centurion Cornelius and other Gentiles (Acts 10:9-11:18, lesson 7). After Peter answered criticism in that regard, the church leaders in Jerusalem approved his actions (11:18, lesson 8). Further inclusion of Gentiles happened in Antioch, where the gospel was preached freely to Greeks (11:19-21). This in turn led to the first missionary journey of Paul and Barnabas (12:25-14:28), with many Gentiles coming to faith as a result (13:44-48; 14:1, 27). When Paul’s preaching to Gentiles was criticized by the Jews of local synagogues, he made a deliberate move to turn his ministry focus to Gentiles (13:46; compare 18:6). From the perspective of historical hindsight, the divinely directed events recorded in Acts were pushing Jewish Christians to accept Gentiles into full fellowship of the church. But this was not so evident at the time. Yet even as Peter, Paul, and others were winning Gentiles to Christ, a teaching that had to be addressed was that access to Christ and salvation was impossible without first going through the synagogue and the Law of Moses. The need to settle this issue resulted in a gathering of Christian leaders in Jerusalem, the famous Jerusalem Council of today’s lesson.

Major Theme Analysis

(Scriptural Text from the New King James Version; cross-references from the NIV)

Grace to Overcome the Law (Acts 15:1-3)

- 1 And certain men came down from Judea and taught the brethren, "Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved."
- 2 Therefore, when Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and dispute with them, they determined that Paul and Barnabas and certain others of them should go up to Jerusalem, to the apostles and elders, about this question.
- 3 So, being sent on their way by the church, they passed through Phoenicia and Samaria, describing the conversion of the Gentiles; and they caused great joy to all the brethren.

Grace to fulfill the Law (1)

Grace over law because God's promises come by grace (Rom 4:16)

16 Therefore, the promise comes by faith, so that it may be by grace and may be guaranteed to all Abraham's offspring — not only to those who are of the law but also to those who are of the faith of Abraham. He is the father of us all.

Grace over law because grace reigns over the law (Rom 5:20-21)

20 The law was added so that the trespass might increase. But where sin increased, grace increased all the more, 21 so that, just as sin reigned in death, so also grace might reign through righteousness to bring eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Grace over law because we are under grace not the law (Rom 6:13-18)

13 Do not offer the parts of your body to sin, as instruments of wickedness, but rather offer yourselves to God, as those who have been brought from death to life; and offer the parts of your body to him as instruments of righteousness. 14 For sin shall not be your master, because you are not under law, but under grace. 15 What then? Shall we sin because we are not under law but under grace? By no means! 16 Don't you know that when you offer yourselves to someone to obey him as slaves, you are slaves to the one whom you obey — whether you are slaves to sin, which leads to death, or to obedience, which leads to righteousness? 17 But thanks be to God that, though you used to be slaves to sin, you wholeheartedly obeyed the form of teaching to which you were entrusted. 18 You have been set free from sin and have become slaves to righteousness.

Grace over law because God has chosen His remnant by grace (Rom 11:5-6)

5 So too, at the present time there is a remnant chosen by grace. 6 And if by grace, then it is no longer by works; if it were, grace would no longer be grace.

Grace over law because God makes grace abound in us (2 Cor 9:8)

8 And God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that in all things at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work.

Grace over law because God's grace is sufficient in all things (2 Cor 12:9)

9 But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me.

Grace over law because we are saved by grace (Eph 2:8-9)

8 For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith — and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God— 9 not by works, so that no one can boast.

Grace to overcome disputes (2)

Grace in disputes by providing fellowship (Gal 2:9)

9 James, Peter and John, those reputed to be pillars, gave me and Barnabas the right hand of fellowship when they recognized the grace given to me. They agreed that we should go to the Gentiles, and they to the Jews.

Grace in disputes because nothing is ever too large for God (Judg 7:4-7)

4 But the Lord said to Gideon, "There are still too many men. Take them down to the water, and I will sift them for you there. If I say, 'This one shall go with you,' he shall go; but if I say, 'This one shall not go with you,' he shall not go." 5 So Gideon took the men down to the water. There the Lord told him, "Separate those who lap the water with their tongues like a dog from those who kneel down to drink." 6 Three hundred men lapped with their hands to their mouths. All the rest got down on their knees to drink. 7 The Lord said to Gideon, "With the three hundred men that lapped I will save you and give the Midianites into your hands. Let all the other men go, each to his own place."

Grace in disputes because reliance on God will always bring deliverance (2 Cor 1:8-10)

8 We do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about the hardships we suffered in the province of Asia. We were under great pressure, far beyond our ability to endure, so that we despaired even of life. 9 Indeed,

in our hearts we felt the sentence of death. But this happened that we might not rely on ourselves but on God, who raises the dead. 10 He has delivered us from such a deadly peril, and he will deliver us. On him we have set our hope that he will continue to deliver us,

The joy of grace (3)

Joy and praise because of God's grace (Acts 11:18)

18 When they heard this, they had no further objections and praised God, saying, "So then, God has granted even the Gentiles repentance unto life."

Joy of grace through serving (1 Peter 4:10-11)

10 Each one should use whatever gift he has received to serve others, faithfully administering God's grace in its various forms. 11 If anyone speaks, he should do it as one speaking the very words of God. If anyone serves, he should do it with the strength God provides, so that in all things God may be praised through Jesus Christ. To him be the glory and the power forever and ever. Amen.

Joy of grace through receiving the crown of joy (Isa 35:10)

10 and the ransomed of the Lord will return. They will enter Zion with singing; everlasting joy will crown their heads. Gladness and joy will overtake them, and sorrow and sighing will flee away.

Joy of grace through the refreshing of God (Acts 3:19)

19 Repent, then, and turn to God, so that your sins may be wiped out, that times of refreshing may come from the Lord,

Joy of grace through liberation (Rom 8:19-21)

19 The creation waits in eager expectation for the sons of God to be revealed. 20 For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope 21 that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God.

Joy of grace through reconciliation (2 Cor 5:17-20)

17 Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come! 18 All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: 19 that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. 20 We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God.

Grace Considered (Acts 15:4-6)

4 And when they had come to Jerusalem, they were received by the church and the apostles and the elders; and they reported all things that God had done with them.

5 But some of the sect of the Pharisees who believed rose up, saying, "It is necessary to circumcise them, and to command them to keep the law of Moses."

6 Now the apostles and elders came together to consider this matter.

Grace considered in accepting one another (4)

Accept one another through agreement and unity (1 Cor 1:10)

10 I appeal to you, brothers, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree with one another so that there may be no divisions among you and that you may be perfectly united in mind and thought.

Accept one another through living in peace (2 Cor 13:11)

11 Finally, brothers, good-by. Aim for perfection, listen to my appeal, be of one mind, live in peace. And the God of love and peace will be with you.

Accept one another by being considerate of the interests of others (Phil 2:2-4)

2 then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and purpose.
3 Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. 4 Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others.

Accept one another in love (1 Peter 3:8-10)

8 Finally, all of you, live in harmony with one another; be sympathetic, love as brothers, be compassionate and humble. 9 Do not repay evil with evil or insult with insult, but with blessing, because to this you were called so that you may inherit a blessing. 10 For, "Whoever would love life and see good days must keep his tongue from evil and his lips from deceitful speech.

Grace considered in making decisions (5-6)

Grace in decisions through guidance by the Holy Spirit (Gal 5:18)

18 But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under law.

Grace in decisions through guidance into insight (Ps 119:99-100)

99 I have more insight than all my teachers, for I meditate on your statutes. 100 I have more understanding than the elders, for I obey your precepts.

Grace in decisions through guidance into understanding (Ps 119:130)

130 The unfolding of your words gives light; it gives understanding to the simple.

Grace in decisions through guidance into wisdom (Prov 2:6)

6 For the Lord gives wisdom, and from his mouth come knowledge and understanding.

Grace the Motivation of Salvation (Acts 15:7-12)

7 And when there had been much dispute, Peter rose up and said to them: "Men and brethren, you know that a good while ago God chose among us, that by my mouth the Gentiles should hear the word of the gospel and believe.

8 So God, who knows the heart, acknowledged them by giving them the Holy Spirit, just as He did to us, 9 and made no distinction between us and them, purifying their hearts by faith.

10 Now therefore, why do you test God by putting a yoke on the neck of the disciples which neither our fathers nor we were able to bear?

11 But we believe that through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ we shall be saved in the same manner as they."

12 Then all the multitude kept silent and listened to Barnabas and Paul declaring how many miracles and wonders God had worked through them among the Gentiles.

God's motivation to choose (7)

God chose His people out of the world (John 15:19)

19 If you belonged to the world, it would love you as its own. As it is, you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world. That is why the world hates you.

God chose His people as a people for Himself (Acts 15:14)

14 Simon has described to us how God at first showed his concern by taking from the Gentiles a people for himself.

God chose His people and He also will justify and glorify them (Rom 8:30)

30 And those he predestined, he also called; those he called, he also justified; those he justified, he also glorified.

God chose His people to be holy and blameless (Eph 1:4)

4 For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love

God chose His people through His grace and for His purpose (2 Tim 1:9)

9 who has saved us and called us to a holy life — not because of anything we have done but because of his own purpose and grace. This grace was given us in Christ Jesus before the beginning of time,

God's motivation to not make distinction (8-9)

All Christians are one in Jesus (Gal 3:27-28)

27 for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. 28 There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.

All Christians are members of one body (1 Cor 12:12)

12 The body is a unit, though it is made up of many parts; and though all its parts are many, they form one body. So it is with Christ.

God has no distinction between Christians (Rom 10:12)

12 For there is no difference between Jew and Gentile — the same Lord is Lord of all and richly blesses all who call on him,

There is no partiality with God (Rom 2:11)

11 For God does not show favoritism.

God's motivation to save (10-12)

Salvation because God wants everyone to come to repentance (2 Peter 3:9)

9 The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.

Salvation because God wants all men to be saved (1 Tim 2:1-4)

2 I urge, then, first of all, that requests, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for everyone— 2 for kings and all those in authority, that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness. 3 This is good, and pleases God our Savior, 4 who wants all men to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth.

Salvation because Jesus came to save the lost (Luke 19:10)

10 For the Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost."

Salvation because God's grace brings salvation before all men (Titus 2:11)

11 For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men.

Conclusion and Other Thoughts

Commentary Thoughts from Bob Deffinbaugh

In Old Testament times, there were a few Gentiles who were “**grafted into**” Israel’s blessings – people like Rahab, Ruth, and Naaman. There weren’t many, and they seemed to pose no threat to the Jews. But with the coming of Jesus, things began to change. A few believing Gentiles are found in the Gospels,⁵ and there are clear indications that many more will follow. The early chapters of the Book of Acts focus on Jewish evangelism, primarily in Jerusalem. Then, in chapter 8, we find the church being scattered abroad by persecution, and thus the gospel is proclaimed in Samaria, and even beyond (such as to the Gentile Ethiopian eunuch). In Acts 10, God dramatically directs Peter to the house of Cornelius, a Gentile, where he preaches the gospel. As a result of Peter’s preaching, all those gathered at the home of Cornelius are saved. While they initially objected to Peter’s actions, his Jewish colleagues had to conclude from Peter’s explanation of these events that God had purposed to seek and to save Gentiles as well as Jews. The birth of the church at Antioch, followed by the first missionary journey, brought many Gentiles into the household of faith. When Paul and Barnabas returned to Antioch, a very serious theological issue surfaced, because some were insisting that Gentile converts must be circumcised and keep the Law. While Luke describes the setting for the Jerusalem Council, the Book of Galatians provides some additional background information. It is my assumption that our text in Acts 15 must be read in conjunction with the Book of Galatians, and especially these verses in chapter 2 (Galatians 2:11-16).

The ambivalence (hypocrisy) of apostles like Peter probably encouraged others who were even more radical in their views to press their demands publicly, as we read in Acts 15: (Acts 15:11; Acts 15:5). We should note that these Judaizers who demanded circumcision and law keeping were not evangelists who were preaching their message to Gentile pagans. These were Jewish believers (those of the Pharisee party) who were targeting newly saved Gentiles. It is interesting how some are more than willing to let others do the evangelizing, only to prey upon these new converts with their distorted doctrines. At first glance, what these Judaizers were demanding may not have seemed that much to ask. They wanted Gentile converts to undergo circumcision. But the rite of circumcision, like baptism, was a symbol, and it implied much more. To the Jews, being circumcised was viewed as a commitment to live under the Law of Moses, as the Old Testament Israelites did. In our text, the implications of circumcision will be spelled out by Peter in just a few verses. But that would be getting ahead of our story.

Paul strongly opposed this added requirement of circumcision as heresy; indeed, it was the introduction of another gospel (Galatians 1:6-9). Because of this, Paul goes on in his Epistle to the Galatians to describe how he rebuked Peter (Cephas) and other Jews (including Barnabas) for their hypocrisy when they separated themselves from Gentile believers at Antioch. If the events of Galatians 2 took place before the Jerusalem Council (as I am inclined to think), then Paul’s strong opposition to error among the saints (including men like Peter) played a crucial role in helping Peter (and the others who were present at the Jerusalem Council) to see this matter much more clearly. To get back to our text, the church at Antioch wisely determined that this debate had raised a vitally important theological question, one that the apostles in Jerusalem needed to answer. And so they sent Paul and Barnabas, along with others, to Jerusalem. On their way to Jerusalem, Paul and Barnabas reported the success of their ministry among the Gentiles to the saints in Phoenicia and Samaria, which was met with great rejoicing. (One would assume that those rejoicing were Gentiles.) When they arrived in Jerusalem, they were received by the church, and they gave a similar report concerning the success of their first missionary journey. Some did not find this an occasion for rejoicing, but instead took this as an

opportunity to press their demands that Gentile converts must be required to be circumcised and to keep the Law of Moses (Acts 15:5).

It is not just the apostles who gather to decide on the issue of circumcision (verse 6). It is the apostles and the elders of the church at Jerusalem. Those who came to Antioch “**from James**” were undoubtedly not apostles, but they did give the impression that they spoke with apostolic approval. It is important that the decision reached in Jerusalem embrace all the leaders in the church. That way, anyone who taught differently would be recognized as a rogue, that is, as a false teacher, speaking only for themselves. This is one of the reasons a letter was written to the Gentile churches. Luke makes it very clear to his readers that he is not reporting every conversation, nor is he elaborating on the viewpoint of those who are demanding circumcision. He gives a summary of the contribution of four individuals: Peter (Acts 15:7-11), Barnabas and Paul (Acts 15:12), and James (Acts 15:13-21). An abridged version of the participation of these four is recorded for us, but only after Luke has told us that there had already been “**much debate**” (Acts 15:7). I would understand this to mean that Luke purposely spared his readers from hearing a complete re-hash of the Judaisers’ arguments. They were wrong, after all, and their error did not need to be publicized. (If these folks were genuinely convinced by the apostles, and fully endorsed the decision of the Council, they would not want their arguments to be aired publicly.) Peter’s argument is recorded first, and James seems to bring the closing word. Barnabas and Paul speak between Peter and James. Peter’s argument is five verses long; James’ argument is somewhat longer (nine verses). Luke grants Barnabas and Paul merely one verse in his account. Why would this be? Barnabas and Paul were the ones under attack. They already had their say with these Judaisers. The purpose of the Council was to hear where the Jerusalem leaders stood on this issue. Peter’s argument is simple and direct. In reality, it is merely a reminder of the events of Acts 10 and 11, and the conclusion which this same group reached. God directed Peter to go to the home of Cornelius, a Gentile, and there to preach the gospel. While Peter was still speaking to them, the Holy Spirit fell upon these Gentiles, indicating that they were saved, having equal standing with the Jewish believers. As Peter put it earlier, (Acts 11:15-17)

Peter’s Jewish brethren could hardly object to what God was doing (Acts 11:18). Peter seems to be saying something like this: “Haven’t we already dealt with this issue and made our decision? Didn’t we agree that God is saving Gentiles as well as Jews? Didn’t we agree that these Gentile saints need only be baptized with water, and not circumcised? Can’t we see that God did not distinguish between these Gentiles and us, because in both cases our hearts were cleansed by faith, and not by works? If, then, we are all saved by faith, and not by works, why are we insisting that Gentiles be burdened with law keeping when it did not save us, nor any of our ancestors? Peter then makes a remarkable statement: “**We believe that we are saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, in the same way as they are.**” I am indebted to James Montgomery Boice for pointing out that this is exactly the opposite of how some Jewish Christians were thinking. The Jews were used to thinking that anyone who wanted to be saved must be saved like they were. In fact, some still were. They were insisting that Gentiles can only participate in God’s blessings to the seed of Abraham by doing what Abraham did – be circumcised. But Peter insists that the Law never saved anyone; it only condemned (compare Romans 3:19-20). He then states that Jews must be saved the same way Gentiles are saved, by faith, apart from law keeping.

Paul states this same point in the Book of Romans:

30 What shall we say then? – that the Gentiles who did not pursue righteousness obtained it, that is, a righteousness that is by faith, 31 but Israel even though pursuing a law of righteousness did not attain it. 32 Why not? Because they pursued it not by faith but (as if it were possible) by works. They stumbled over the stumbling stone, 33 just as it is written, “**Look, I am laying in Zion a stone that will cause people to stumble and a rock that will make them fall, yet the one who believes in him will not be put to shame.**” 1 Brothers and sisters, my heart’s desire and prayer to God on behalf of my fellow Israelites is for their salvation. 2 For I can testify that they are zealous for God, but their zeal is not in line with the truth. 3 For ignoring the righteousness that comes from God, and seeking instead to establish their own righteousness, they did not submit to God’s righteousness. 4 For Christ is the end of the law, with the result that there is righteousness for everyone who believes (Romans 9:30—10:4).

Now that Peter has spoken, Barnabas and Paul speak to a hushed group as they report to them concerning the many miraculous signs and wonders that God performed through them as they proclaimed the gospel to the Gentiles. Jesus punctuated His teaching with signs and wonders and miracles of various kinds (See John 2:11; 4:54; 6:2; 9:16; 11:47; Acts 2:22). So too God produced many signs and wonders through the apostles in Jerusalem, Judea, and Samaria (see Acts 2:43; 5:12). Now, Barnabas and Paul describe the same miraculous phenomena when they preached the gospel to the Gentiles (see also Acts 14:3). Truly, God did not distinguish between Jews and Gentiles. In verses 13-21, James steps forward. One does not get the impression that Peter is the dominant leader here; instead, James seems to play that role. James does something that the three before him have not done – he cites Scripture. Thus, the decision that is reached is based both upon Scripture and on experience. James follows up on what Peter has said. God has revealed His purpose to save Gentiles as well as Jews. This is the fulfillment of what the Old Testament prophets had foretold. James turns to the words of Amos 9:11-12 to establish his point (Acts 15:16-17). This text emphasizes two different lines of prophecy, which intersect in the person and work of Jesus. *First*, God promises to restore the dynasty of David so as to fulfill the Davidic Covenant. The Lord Jesus Christ is the “**Son of David**,” who will sit on the throne of His father. The *second* promise is that the restoration of the throne to David’s “**Son**” will fulfill God’s purpose to save those Gentiles God has chosen for Himself. This, the prophet tells us, has been made known “**from long ago**.” Do these two themes (the restoration of the throne to David’s “**son**” and the salvation of Gentiles) not converge in the person of our Lord, as seen in the fourth chapter of Luke?

16 Now Jesus came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, and went into the synagogue on the Sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read, 17 and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written, 18 “*The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and the regaining of sight to the blind, to set free those who are oppressed, 19 to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.*” 20 Then he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of everyone in the synagogue were fixed on him. 21 Then he began to tell them, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled even as you heard it being read.” 22 All were speaking well of him, and were amazed at the gracious words coming out of his mouth. They said, “Isn’t this Joseph’s son?” 23 Jesus said to them, “No doubt you will quote to me the proverb, ‘Physician, heal yourself!’ and say, ‘What we have heard that you did in Capernaum, do here in your hometown too.’” 24 And he added, “I tell you the truth, no prophet is acceptable in his hometown. 25 But in truth I tell you, there were many widows in Israel in Elijah’s days, when the sky was shut up three and a half years, and there was a great famine over all the land. 26 Yet Elijah was sent to none of them, but only to a woman who was a widow at Zarephath in Sidon. 27 And there were many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, yet none of them was cleansed except Naaman the Syrian.” 28 When they heard this, all the people in the synagogue were filled with rage. 29 They got up, forced him out of the town, and brought him to the brow of the hill on which their town was built, so that they could throw him down the cliff. 30 But he passed through the crowd and went on his way (Luke 4:16-30).

James is saying that the salvation of many Gentiles should come as no surprise to his Jewish brethren. This is what God long ago promised to do. This is what God has done, as evidenced by the salvation of Cornelius and his household, and now many more Gentiles in the first missionary journey. The question is no longer, “Has God chosen to save many Gentiles?”; the question is, “How should the Jewish saints deal with these newly-saved Gentile saints?” They should surely not impose upon these Gentiles burdens that God did not lay on them. It is interesting that James never actually uses the word *circumcision*, but this is clearly what is in his mind. They dare not impose the rite of circumcision on Gentile converts. They dare not insist that Gentile converts place themselves under the Law. Their Jewish brethren had sought to keep the Law for centuries, finding their efforts to be futile.

(Adapted from URL:<https://bible.org/seriespage/21-great-debates-acts-151-41>)

Concluding Thoughts from the Bible Expositor and Illuminator Commentary

Basic to understanding the Bible is making distinctions between various covenants found in Scripture. To fail to do so leads not only to confusion but also to incorrect conclusions concerning certain commands found in

God's Word. While the covenants found in different parts of the Bible have certain similarities, there are also marked differences. Jeremiah foretold that a new covenant was coming (Jer. 31:31 -34). Contrasting old and new covenants, Hebrews 8:7 declares, "For if that first covenant had been faultless, then should no place have been sought for the second." The above being true means that features found in the old covenant were not automatically transferred to the new. A number of commands found in the Old Testament are repeated in the New Testament, such as various moral teachings, many of which were actually strengthened (cf. Matt. 5:17-48). The rituals of the old covenant are not binding on New Testament believers, however. This was at the heart of the controversy facing the Christian church in Acts 15.

The Jews considered the Gentiles to be beyond the scope of God's love. We know in our heads that God will accept anyone. Sometimes, however, we have a hard time loving some people, which keeps us from sharing God's love with them. Who are some people in our lives who are hard to love? We may have a hard time loving people who have a different ethnic or economic background or whose appearance is very different. When we avoid such people, we are no different from the Jews who refused to accept the Gentiles. What happens when we avoid these people? We do not have an opportunity to share God's love with them. How can we show God's love to these "unlovely" people? We can show God's love by a greeting, an act of kindness, or an invitation to an event. In doing so, we should always look for opportunities to say, "God loves you and wants to save you."

Practical Points from the Bible Expositor and Illuminator

1. Some religionists still present man-made requirements as God's rules (Acts 15:1)
2. Arguing against false doctrine in the church is unsettling, but it is the leaders' sacred duty (vs. 2)
3. God's heart for all peoples is seen in the conversion of Gentiles (vss. 3-4)
4. We are not the first ones to see misguided teachers have widespread influence in the church (vs. 5)
5. God knows people's hearts, both Jews and Gentiles (vss. 6-9)
6. Avoid requiring something of others that you cannot accomplish (vs. 10)
7. Everyone is saved the same way, through God's grace (vss. 11-12)