

CRAWFORD BIBLE COMMENTARY

BIBLE STUDY

Acts Chapter 15 — The Council at Jerusalem

A Verse-by-Verse Bible Study from the Crawford Standard Bible

Introduction

Acts Chapter 15 records one of the most important doctrinal disputes in the history of the early church.

The issue was simple to state but enormous in its consequences:

Must Gentile believers become Jewish in order to be saved?

More specifically:

Must Gentile believers be circumcised?

Must they place themselves under the law of Moses?

Must faith in Jesus Christ be supplemented by ceremonial obedience?

Some teachers answered:

Yes.

They said:

“Unless you are circumcised according to the law of Moses, you cannot be saved.”

Paul and Barnabas strongly disagreed.

Why?

Because this was not merely a disagreement about customs.

It concerned:

The gospel itself.

If salvation required:

Faith in Christ

plus circumcision,

plus law-keeping,

plus ceremonial identity,

then salvation would no longer rest upon:

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ.

The controversy became serious enough that Paul, Barnabas, and others traveled to Jerusalem to meet with:

The apostles.

The elders.

The church.

Peter testified about what God had already done among the Gentiles.

He reminded the assembly that God:

Gave them the Holy Spirit.

Made no distinction between Jew and Gentile.

Purified their hearts:

“By faith.”

Then Peter asked a powerful question:

“Why are you testing God by putting on the disciples a burden that neither we nor our ancestors could bear?”

Then comes one of the most important statements in Acts:

“We believe it is through the grace of the Lord Jesus that we are saved, just as they are.”

Barnabas and Paul then report the signs and wonders God had performed among the Gentiles.

James speaks next.

He points to Scripture.

The inclusion of Gentiles was not an accident.

It agreed with the prophets.

God had always intended to call:

A people for His name from among the Gentiles.

The council therefore decides:

Do not burden Gentile believers with circumcision and the Mosaic law as conditions of salvation.

Instead, they are given several practical instructions intended to preserve:

Holiness.

Separation from idolatry.

Sexual purity.

And fellowship between Jewish and Gentile believers.

A letter is sent to Antioch.

When the believers read it:

They rejoice.

Acts 15 therefore gives us one of Scripture's clearest declarations that:

Salvation is by the grace of Jesus Christ through faith, not through works of the law.

But the chapter does not end with the council.

Paul and Barnabas later disagree sharply over whether John Mark should accompany them on another missionary journey.

Barnabas wants Mark.

Paul does not.

The disagreement becomes so strong that they separate.

Barnabas takes Mark.

Paul takes Silas.

It is a painful moment.

Yet God continues working.

Two missionary teams emerge instead of one.

Acts 15 therefore teaches both:

Doctrinal truth must be defended carefully.

And:

Even faithful Christian leaders may sometimes disagree personally.

The chapter begins with a dispute that threatened the gospel.

It ends with churches still being:

Strengthened.

The central truth of Acts 15 is:

Salvation comes entirely through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and is received by faith, not by circumcision or works of the Mosaic law, and the church must defend that gospel while pursuing holiness, unity, wisdom, and continued mission.

I. A FALSE REQUIREMENT FOR SALVATION

Acts 15:1

“Some men came down from Judea and taught the believers: ‘Unless you are circumcised according to the law of Moses, you cannot be saved.’”

This is the central controversy.

Notice what they did not merely say.

They did not say:

Circumcision is a good Jewish tradition.

They said:

“You cannot be saved.”

That changes everything.

Cross References

Galatians 2:4

Paul described false believers who secretly entered Christian fellowship in order to spy on the freedom believers have in Christ and bring them back into religious bondage.

Galatians 5:2

Paul warned that if Gentile believers accepted circumcision as a requirement for justification, they would be abandoning dependence upon Christ alone.

Titus 1:10

Paul warned that there were rebellious people and deceptive teachers, especially among those promoting circumcision.

Spiritual Principle

Anything added to Jesus Christ as a necessary condition for justification corrupts the gospel of grace.

Crawford Bible Study Principle

Jesus plus anything as the basis of salvation becomes a different message from salvation by grace through faith.

II. PAUL AND BARNABAS RESIST THE TEACHING

Acts 15:2

“This caused sharp disagreement and debate with Paul and Barnabas. So the church appointed Paul, Barnabas, and others to go up to Jerusalem to see the apostles and elders about this question.”

Paul and Barnabas do not treat this as a minor disagreement.

Why?

Because the gospel is at stake.

Cross References

Galatians 2:1

Paul later described traveling to Jerusalem with Barnabas in connection with questions surrounding the gospel among Gentiles.

Acts 15:39

Paul and Barnabas would later have another sharp disagreement, though that one concerned Mark rather than the gospel.

Acts 21:25

The Jerusalem leaders later referred again to their earlier decision concerning Gentile believers.

Spiritual Principle

There are issues Christians may discuss with patience, but when the gospel itself is being changed, clarity becomes essential.

III. THE CONVERSION OF GENTILES BRINGS JOY

Acts 15:3

“On their way, they traveled through Phoenicia and Samaria, telling how the Gentiles had turned to God. This news brought great joy to all the believers.”

The genuine conversion of Gentiles produces:

Joy.

Cross References

Acts 11:19

Believers scattered through persecution had carried the gospel into Phoenicia and other regions.

Acts 8:25

Peter and John preached the gospel in many Samaritan villages while returning toward Jerusalem.

Luke 15:7

Jesus taught that heaven rejoices when sinners repent.

Spiritual Principle

A healthy church rejoices when sinners turn to God, regardless of their background.

IV. THEY REPORT WHAT GOD HAS DONE

Acts 15:4

“When they arrived in Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the church, the apostles, and the elders, and they reported everything God had done through them.”

Again Luke emphasizes:

What God had done.

Cross References

Acts 14:27

Paul and Barnabas had previously gathered the Antioch church and reported everything God had done through them.

Acts 21:19

Paul later gave a detailed report concerning what God had done among the Gentiles through his ministry.

Galatians 2:2

Paul explained the gospel he preached among the Gentiles when meeting with church leaders.

Crawford Bible Study Principle

Faithful ministry reporting should magnify God’s work rather than human achievement.

V. SOME BELIEVERS INSIST ON CIRCUMCISION

Acts 15:5

“But some believers from the party of the Pharisees insisted, ‘The Gentiles must be circumcised and required to obey the law of Moses.’”

These people are identified as believers.

That means genuine Christians may sometimes retain serious misunderstandings from their former religious framework.

Cross References

Acts 15:1

Some teachers had already declared circumcision necessary for salvation.

Galatians 2:3

Titus, though a Gentile believer, was not compelled to be circumcised.

Philippians 3:2

Paul strongly warned believers against teachers who made circumcision a requirement for spiritual standing.

Spiritual Principle

Conversion does not instantly remove every mistaken theological assumption; believers must continue learning truth.

VI. THE APOSTLES AND ELDERS MEET

Acts 15:6

“The apostles and elders met to consider this matter.”

The issue is not ignored.

It is examined.

Cross References

Acts 15:2

Paul, Barnabas, and others were sent to Jerusalem specifically to discuss the disputed question.

Acts 6:2

Earlier the apostles had gathered the church to address an important practical problem.

Acts 15:22

After discussion, the apostles, elders, and whole church agreed upon a course of action.

Crawford Bible Study Principle

Serious church problems should be addressed carefully rather than allowed to grow through silence and confusion.

VII. PETER REMINDS THEM OF CORNELIUS

Acts 15:7

“After much debate, Peter stood up and said: ‘Brothers, you know that some time ago God chose me to share the gospel with the Gentiles so they could believe.’”

Peter reaches back to Acts 10.

Cornelius.

His household.

The Gentiles.

Cross References

Acts 10:1

Cornelius, a Roman centurion, became the central Gentile figure through whom God demonstrated the widening gospel mission.

Acts 10:34

Peter declared that he had learned that God does not show favoritism.

Acts 15:14

James later refers to Peter’s testimony about God taking a people for His name from among the Gentiles.

Spiritual Principle

The Jerusalem Council is not inventing Gentile inclusion; it is recognizing what God already demonstrated.

VIII. GOD KNOWS THE HEART

Acts 15:8

“God, who knows the heart, showed His approval by giving them the Holy Spirit, just as He did to us.”

Peter’s argument is powerful.

God knows the heart.

God gave the Spirit.

God approved.

Cross References

Acts 10:44

While Peter was preaching, the Holy Spirit came upon the Gentiles who heard the gospel.

Acts 1:24

The disciples prayed to the Lord as the One who knows every human heart.

1 Samuel 16:7

Human beings look at outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart.

Spiritual Principle

God’s judgment of a person is deeper than human cultural categories or outward religious distinctions.

IX. HEARTS PURIFIED BY FAITH

Acts 15:9

“He made no distinction between us and them, for He purified their hearts by faith.”

This verse is foundational.

No Distinction

Jew and Gentile come to God the same way.

Hearts Purified

The real problem is internal.

By Faith

Not circumcision.

Not ethnic identity.

Not ceremonial law.

Cross References

Acts 10:15

God told Peter not to call unclean what God had made clean.

Romans 10:12

There is no distinction between Jew and Gentile because the same Lord is Lord of all.

Ephesians 2:14

Christ Himself is our peace and has broken down the dividing wall between Jew and Gentile.

Crawford Bible Study Principle

The gospel does not purify people by changing their ethnicity; God purifies hearts through faith in Christ.

X. “WHY ARE YOU TESTING GOD?”

Acts 15:10

“Why are you testing God by putting on the disciples a burden that neither we nor our ancestors could bear?”

Peter describes the attempt to impose the law as:

Testing God.

Cross References

Galatians 5:1

Christ set believers free, so they should stand firm and refuse to return to a yoke of religious slavery.

Matthew 23:4

Jesus condemned religious leaders who loaded people with heavy spiritual burdens while failing to help them.

Galatians 3:10

Everyone who depends upon works of the law for righteousness comes under obligation to keep the law completely.

Important Truth

Peter is not calling God's law evil.

The problem is trying to use the law as a means of justification.

No sinner has kept it perfectly.

Spiritual Principle

The law can reveal God's righteous standard, but it cannot turn a guilty sinner into a righteous person by human effort.

XI. SAVED THROUGH THE GRACE OF JESUS

Acts 15:11

"We believe it is through the grace of the Lord Jesus that we are saved, just as they are."

This may be the key doctrinal verse of the chapter.

Peter does not say:

Gentiles can be saved like Jews.

Notice the direction:

"We are saved, just as they are."

Everyone is saved the same way.

Through Grace

Not merit.

Through the Lord Jesus

Not Moses.

Saved

Not merely improved.

Cross References

Ephesians 2:8

You have been saved by grace through faith, and this salvation is God's gift rather than something you earned.

Romans 3:24

Sinners are justified freely by God's grace through the redemption found in Jesus Christ.

Titus 3:5

God saved us not because of righteous deeds we had performed, but because of His mercy.

Crawford Bible Study Principle

“Grace Does Not Complete What Works Begin; Grace Is the Basis of Salvation From Beginning to End.”

XII. THE ASSEMBLY LISTENS

Acts 15:12

“The whole assembly became silent and listened as Barnabas and Paul told about the signs and wonders God had done among the Gentiles through them.”

They listen to evidence.

Cross References

Acts 15:4

Paul and Barnabas had already reported what God had done among the Gentiles.

Acts 14:27

They reported how God had opened the door of faith to Gentiles.

Romans 15:18

Paul refused to boast except about what Christ had accomplished through his ministry among the Gentiles.

Spiritual Principle

Healthy discernment listens carefully before reaching conclusions.

XIII. JAMES SPEAKS

Acts 15:13

“When they finished, James spoke up: ‘Brothers, listen to me.’”

James appears as an important leader in the Jerusalem church.

Cross References

Acts 15:7

Peter had already offered testimony after extensive discussion.

Acts 21:18

Paul later met with James and the elders in Jerusalem.

Galatians 2:9

Paul identifies James, Peter, and John as recognized pillars within the church.

Spiritual Principle

Strong leadership listens before speaking.

James waits.

Hears Peter.

Hears Paul.

Hears Barnabas.

Then addresses Scripture.

XIV. GOD TAKES A PEOPLE FROM THE GENTILES

Acts 15:14

“Simon has described how God first intervened to take a people for His name from among the Gentiles.”

Gentiles are not merely tolerated.

God is gathering:

“A people for His name.”

Cross References

Acts 10:48

Gentile believers in Cornelius’ household were baptized in the name of Jesus Christ.

Romans 9:24

God calls His people from both Jews and Gentiles.

Titus 2:14

Christ gave Himself to redeem and purify a people belonging to Him.

Spiritual Principle

God's redeemed people are defined by belonging to Him rather than by ethnicity.

XV. SCRIPTURE AGREES

Acts 15:15

“This agrees with the words of the prophets.”

James does something essential.

He does not base doctrine merely upon experience.

He examines the experience through:

Scripture.

Cross References

Luke 24:44

Jesus explained that everything written about Him in the Law, the Prophets, and the Psalms had to be fulfilled.

Romans 3:21

The righteousness God provides is testified to by the Law and the Prophets.

1 Peter 1:10

The prophets carefully searched and spoke concerning the grace that would come through Christ.

Crawford Bible Study Principle

Experience may demonstrate God's activity, but Scripture must interpret the meaning of that activity.

XVI. DAVID'S FALLEN TENT WILL BE RESTORED

Acts 15:16

“After this I will return and rebuild David's fallen tent. Its ruins I will rebuild, and I will restore it.”

James quotes Amos.

Cross References

Amos 9:11

God promised that He would restore the fallen house of David and rebuild what had been ruined.

Jeremiah 12:15

God promised restoration after judgment and displacement.

Isaiah 16:5

Isaiah foretold a throne established in faithfulness from the house of David.

Spiritual Principle

God's kingdom purposes through David ultimately reach fulfillment in the Messiah.

XVII. THE GENTILES WILL SEEK THE LORD

Acts 15:17

“So that the rest of mankind may seek the Lord, even all the Gentiles who bear My name, says the Lord, who does these things.”

This destroys the idea that Gentile salvation was an emergency adjustment.

God foretold it.

Cross References

Amos 9:12

God foretold that nations called by His name would become part of His redemptive purpose.

Isaiah 45:22

God calls people from the ends of the earth to turn to Him and be saved.

Zechariah 8:22

Many peoples and strong nations would come seeking the Lord.

Crawford Bible Study Principle

The mission to the Gentiles was not Plan B; it was part of God's revealed redemptive purpose.

XVIII. GOD DECLARED THESE THINGS LONG AGO

Acts 15:18

“The Lord has made these things known from long ago.”

God was not surprised.

Cross References

Isaiah 45:21

God declares that He announced His saving purposes long beforehand and that there is no Savior besides Him.

Ephesians 1:4

God’s saving purpose in Christ reaches back before the foundation of the world.

Isaiah 46:10

God declares the end from the beginning and makes known what will happen before it occurs; His purpose will stand.

Spiritual Principle

What appears sudden to us may have been part of God’s purpose from the beginning.

XIX. DO NOT MAKE IT DIFFICULT FOR GENTILES

Acts 15:19

“Therefore, my judgment is that we should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God.”

James gives his conclusion.

Do not add unnecessary barriers.

Cross References

Galatians 5:1

Christ has given believers freedom, and they should not return to bondage.

Acts 15:28

The council later states that it would impose no unnecessary burden beyond several practical requirements.

Galatians 2:3

Titus, though a Gentile, was not forced to be circumcised.

Crawford Bible Study Principle

“Never Make It Harder for People to Come to Christ Than God Does.”

The gospel already calls for:

Repentance.

Faith.

Submission to Christ.

Do not add human requirements for justification.

XX. PRACTICAL INSTRUCTIONS FOR GENTILE BELIEVERS

Acts 15:20

“Instead, we should write to them to abstain from food polluted by idols, from sexual immorality, from meat of strangled animals, and from blood.”

These instructions require careful understanding.

They were not conditions for earning salvation.

Peter had already established salvation by grace.

Instead, these instructions addressed:

Holiness.

Idolatry.

Sexual morality.

And practical fellowship between Jewish and Gentile believers.

Cross References

Leviticus 17:10

God had commanded His people to avoid consuming blood because blood had sacred significance connected with life and sacrifice.

1 Corinthians 8:1

Paul later addressed food offered to idols and explained that Christian freedom must be governed by love and concern for others.

Revelation 2:14

Jesus condemned practices connected with idolatrous food and sexual immorality.

Important Truth

Sexual immorality is a moral issue.

Food-related instructions also helped Gentile believers separate themselves from pagan worship and maintain fellowship with Jewish Christians.

Crawford Bible Study Principle

Grace frees us from trying to earn salvation, but grace never gives permission to live carelessly in sin.

XXI. MOSES IS READ IN EVERY CITY

Acts 15:21

“For the law of Moses has been preached in every city from ancient times and is read in the synagogues every Sabbath.”

James recognizes that Jewish communities were widespread.

Gentile conduct could either help or hinder fellowship.

Cross References

2 Corinthians 3:15

Paul later said that Moses continued to be read regularly in Jewish gatherings.

Luke 4:16

Jesus regularly attended synagogue worship on the Sabbath and participated in Scripture reading.

Acts 13:15

Paul had previously preached after the reading of the Law and the Prophets.

Spiritual Principle

Christian freedom should be exercised with sensitivity toward the consciences and backgrounds of other believers.

XXII. THE CHURCH REACHES AGREEMENT

Acts 15:22

“Then the apostles, elders, and the whole church decided to send Paul and Barnabas, along with Judas called Barsabbas and Silas, two respected leaders among the believers.”

The decision is communicated responsibly.

Cross References

Acts 15:27

Judas and Silas were sent to confirm verbally what the letter stated.

Acts 16:19

Silas later became Paul’s missionary companion.

Acts 15:32

Judas and Silas were prophets who encouraged the believers.

Spiritual Principle

Good church decisions should be communicated clearly through trustworthy people.

XXIII. A WRITTEN LETTER IS SENT

Acts 15:23

“They sent the following letter.”

The decision is put in writing.

This protects against:

Distortion.

Rumor.

Misrepresentation.

Cross References

Acts 15:30

The messengers carried the letter to Antioch and delivered it to the believers.

Acts 15:22

The church chose respected representatives to carry the decision.

2 Corinthians 3:3

Paul described believers themselves as a letter of Christ, showing the power of communicated truth.

Spiritual Principle

Clarity is important when resolving doctrinal controversy.

XXIV. THE FALSE TEACHERS WERE NOT AUTHORIZED

Acts 15:24

“We have heard that some went out from us without our authorization and troubled you, saying you must be circumcised and obey the law.”

This is significant.

The false teachers claimed association with Jerusalem.

But Jerusalem says:

We did not send them.

Cross References

Galatians 1:7

Paul warned that some people were confusing believers and attempting to distort the gospel of Christ.

Galatians 2:4

False teachers had infiltrated Christian fellowship in order to bring believers into bondage.

Titus 1:11

Paul warned that false teachers can disturb entire households through teaching things they should not teach.

Crawford Bible Study Principle

Not everyone who claims religious authority actually carries biblical authority.

XXV. THE CHURCH ACTS IN UNITY

Acts 15:25

“So we agreed, being united, to send you chosen men with our beloved Barnabas and Paul.”

A major dispute has reached agreement.

Cross References

Acts 15:22

The apostles, elders, and church agreed upon representatives.

Philippians 2:2

Paul urged believers to be united in love, purpose, and mind.

Acts 15:6

The leaders had met seriously to consider the disputed matter.

Spiritual Principle

Unity does not mean avoiding difficult questions; genuine unity can emerge through careful discussion under truth.

XXVI. BARNABAS AND PAUL RISKED THEIR LIVES

Acts 15:26

“Men who have risked their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

This is a beautiful description.

Cross References

Acts 15:40

Paul later left on another missionary journey, again entrusted to the grace of the Lord.

Acts 9:16

Jesus had said Paul would learn how much he must suffer for Christ's name.

Philippians 2:30

Epaphroditus later risked his life for the work of Christ.

Crawford Bible Study Principle

The gospel is worth more than personal comfort and safety.

XXVII. JUDAS AND SILAS CONFIRM THE MESSAGE

Acts 15:27

“We are sending Judas and Silas to confirm what we are writing.”

Multiple witnesses strengthen confidence.

Cross References

Acts 15:22

Judas and Silas were respected leaders selected by the church.

2 Corinthians 13:1

Biblical judgment is strengthened through confirmation by more than one witness.

Acts 15:32

Judas and Silas later encouraged the believers personally.

Spiritual Principle

Important truth should be communicated in ways that minimize confusion.

XXVIII. “IT SEEMED GOOD TO THE HOLY SPIRIT AND TO US”

Acts 15:28

“It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us not to burden you with anything beyond the following requirements.”

This is a remarkable statement.

The church recognizes the Holy Spirit’s guidance.

Cross References

Acts 15:22

The whole church participated in the decision after hearing testimony and Scripture.

Acts 5:32

God gives the Holy Spirit to those who obey Him.

John 16:13

Jesus promised that the Spirit of truth would guide His followers into truth.

Spiritual Principle

Healthy church decisions should seek alignment with the Holy Spirit through Scripture, truth, wisdom, and godly counsel.

XXIX. THE REQUIREMENTS ARE REPEATED

Acts 15:29

“You are to abstain from food sacrificed to idols, from blood, from meat of strangled animals, and from sexual immorality. If you keep yourselves from these, you will do well. Farewell.”

Again:

These practices do not earn salvation.

The whole chapter has already established salvation by grace.

Cross References

Leviticus 17:10

God prohibited eating blood because of its connection with life and sacrificial significance.

1 Thessalonians 4:3

God’s will for believers includes holiness and abstaining from sexual immorality.

Revelation 2:20

Jesus condemned false teaching that encouraged sexual immorality and participation in idolatrous practices.

Crawford Bible Study Principle

Salvation is free, but discipleship is not careless. Grace saves us and then teaches us to live differently.

XXX. THE LETTER REACHES ANTIOCH

Acts 15:30

“The men were sent off and went to Antioch, where they gathered the believers and delivered the letter.”

The church receives authoritative clarification.

Cross References

Acts 15:4

Paul and Barnabas had earlier been welcomed in Jerusalem.

Acts 15:35

Paul and Barnabas later continued teaching and preaching in Antioch.

Galatians 2:11

Antioch remained an important location in early Jewish-Gentile Christian relations.

Spiritual Principle

Confusion is often relieved when truth is clearly communicated.

XXXI. THE BELIEVERS REJOICE

Acts 15:31

“The people read it and were glad for its encouraging message.”

Why were they glad?

Because the letter confirmed:

They did not need to become Jews before they could belong to Christ.

Cross References

Nehemiah 8:12

God’s people rejoiced after understanding the words that had been explained to them.

Philippians 4:4

Believers are commanded to rejoice in the Lord.

Acts 13:48

Gentile hearers had previously rejoiced when they understood that God's saving message reached them.

Crawford Bible Study Principle

Grace produces joy because grace removes the impossible burden of trying to earn acceptance with God.

XXXII. JUDAS AND SILAS STRENGTHEN THE CHURCH

Acts 15:32

“Judas and Silas, who were prophets, encouraged and strengthened the believers with many words.”

Doctrine is followed by encouragement.

Cross References

Acts 15:22

Judas and Silas were chosen because they were respected leaders.

1 Corinthians 14:3

Prophetic ministry is described as strengthening, encouraging, and comforting believers.

Acts 11:23

Barnabas had previously encouraged believers to remain true to the Lord.

Spiritual Principle

Healthy ministry combines doctrinal clarity with pastoral encouragement.

XXXIII. THEY ARE SENT OFF IN PEACE

Acts 15:33

“After spending some time there, they were sent off with the blessing of peace to those who had sent them.”

The controversy produced peace.

Cross References

Acts 15:30

The men had been sent to Antioch carrying the council's letter.

Numbers 6:26

God's blessing includes His peace resting upon His people.

1 Corinthians 16:11

Faithful ministry coworkers should be sent forward in peace and honor.

Spiritual Principle

Truth handled rightly can produce peace instead of continuing confusion.

XXXIV. SILAS REMAINS

Acts 15:34

“But Silas decided to remain.”

This small detail prepares for what comes next.

Silas will soon become Paul's missionary companion.

Cross References

Acts 15:40

Paul later chose Silas for the next missionary journey.

Acts 15:22

Silas was already recognized as a respected church leader.

Acts 17:14

Silas continued serving alongside Paul during later missionary work.

Spiritual Principle

God often prepares tomorrow's ministry partnerships through today's ordinary decisions.

XXXV. PAUL AND BARNABAS CONTINUE TEACHING

Acts 15:35

“Paul and Barnabas stayed in Antioch, teaching and preaching the word of the Lord with many others.”

Antioch remains strong.

Cross References

Acts 11:26

Paul and Barnabas had previously spent a year teaching the Antioch church.

Acts 13:1

Antioch had developed a strong teaching ministry with multiple leaders.

Acts 15:36

Paul soon suggested revisiting the churches established during the first missionary journey.

Crawford Bible Study Principle

A healthy church needs both preaching that reaches the lost and teaching that strengthens believers.

XXXVI. PAUL WANTS TO RETURN TO THE CHURCHES

Acts 15:36

“After some time Paul said to Barnabas, ‘Let us go back and visit the believers in every town where we preached the word of the Lord, to see how they are doing.’”

Paul has a shepherd’s heart.

He wants to know:

How are they doing?

Cross References

Acts 15:41

Paul later traveled through Syria and Cilicia strengthening churches.

Acts 13:4

Paul and Barnabas had originally been sent out by the Holy Spirit.

Acts 18:23

Paul later traveled again strengthening disciples in multiple regions.

Spiritual Principle

Real ministry cares about what happens to people after conversion.

XXXVII. BARNABAS WANTS JOHN MARK

Acts 15:37

“Barnabas wanted to take John Mark with them.”

Barnabas remains:

The encourager.

He sees potential in Mark.

Cross References

Acts 12:25

John Mark had previously accompanied Barnabas and Saul.

Acts 13:13

Mark had left the missionary team in Pamphylia.

Colossians 4:10

Mark later became a recognized ministry coworker.

Spiritual Principle

Barnabas saw not only Mark’s failure, but also the possibility of restoration.

XXXVIII. PAUL DOES NOT AGREE

Acts 15:38

“But Paul did not think it wise, since Mark had deserted them in Pamphylia and had not continued with them in the work.”

Paul’s concern is understandable.

Missionary work was difficult.

Reliability mattered.

Cross References

Acts 13:13

Mark had indeed left the missionary team and returned to Jerusalem.

2 Timothy 4:11

Years later Paul would say that Mark had become useful to him for ministry.

Colossians 4:10

Mark later appears as an accepted ministry coworker.

Important Truth

Scripture does not explicitly tell us:

Paul was completely right.

Or:

Barnabas was completely right.

Each saw a legitimate concern.

Paul emphasized:

Reliability.

Barnabas emphasized:

Restoration.

Crawford Bible Study Principle

Sometimes two faithful believers can see different legitimate concerns within the same situation.

XXXIX. PAUL AND BARNABAS SEPARATE

Acts 15:39

“They had such a sharp disagreement that they parted ways. Barnabas took Mark and sailed for Cyprus.”

This is painful.

Two men who had served together through:

Mission.

Persecution.

Church planting.

Doctrinal controversy.

Now separate.

Cross References

Acts 4:36

Barnabas was originally known as the son of encouragement.

Acts 13:4

Barnabas and Paul had previously been sent together by the Holy Spirit.

Acts 9:27

Barnabas had once stood beside Saul when others were afraid to trust him.

Spiritual Principle

Even mature believers can sometimes experience painful relational disagreement.

XL. PAUL CHOOSES SILAS

Acts 15:40

“But Paul chose Silas and left, commended by the believers to the grace of the Lord.”

The mission continues.

Cross References

Acts 13:3

Paul had previously been sent out with prayer and the support of the church.

Acts 15:32

Silas had already demonstrated spiritual maturity and prophetic ministry.

Acts 16:19

Silas would become Paul’s trusted companion through suffering and imprisonment.

Spiritual Principle

A painful change in partnership does not have to end the mission.

XLI. THE CHURCHES ARE STRENGTHENED

Acts 15:41

“He traveled through Syria and Cilicia, strengthening the churches.”

The chapter ends not with:

Division.

Bitterness.

Failure.

But:

Strengthening churches.

Cross References

Galatians 1:21

Paul had previous ministry connections in Syria and Cilicia.

Acts 15:36

Paul's stated purpose was to revisit and strengthen believers.

Acts 18:23

Strengthening disciples remained a continuing pattern in Paul's ministry.

Crawford Bible Study Principle

Even after painful disagreement, faithful servants should keep strengthening Christ's church.

XLII. THE GREAT DOCTRINAL QUESTION OF ACTS 15

The question was:

Is Faith in Christ Enough for Salvation?

The false teachers said:

No.

You also need circumcision.

Peter said:

God purified their hearts by faith.

And:

"Through the grace of the Lord Jesus we are saved."

Crawford Bible Study Principle

"Salvation Is Jesus Plus Nothing."

Not:

Jesus plus circumcision.

Jesus plus law-keeping.

Jesus plus religious heritage.

Jesus plus human achievement.

We are saved:

By grace.

Through faith.

In Christ.

XLIII. GRACE AND WORKS MUST NOT BE CONFUSED

Works have a place in Christianity.

But not as the basis of justification.

Works Follow Salvation

They do not purchase it.

Obedience Demonstrates Faith

It does not create saving merit.

Holiness Matters

But holiness grows from grace.

Spiritual Principle

Good works are the fruit of salvation, not the price of salvation.

XLIV. GOD MADE NO DISTINCTION

Peter said:

“He made no distinction between us and them.”

That destroys spiritual superiority based upon ethnicity.

Jew and Gentile need:

The same Savior.

The same grace.

The same faith.

Crawford Bible Study Principle

The ground at the cross is level because every sinner needs the same grace.

XLV. PURIFIED BY FAITH

Acts 15:9 says:

“He purified their hearts by faith.”

Religion often concentrates on:

External regulations.

God goes deeper.

The heart.

Spiritual Principle

God does not merely reform outward behavior; He transforms inward allegiance.

XLVI. WHY THE LAW CANNOT SAVE

Peter says the burden could not be borne.

Paul says elsewhere that law cannot justify.

Why?

Because the law requires righteousness.

Sinners fail.

The Law Reveals Sin

The Law Defines Righteousness

The Law Exposes Guilt

But Jesus Provides Grace

Crawford Bible Study Principle

The law can diagnose the disease of sin, but only Christ provides the cure.

XLVII. THE COUNCIL USED THREE FORMS OF EVIDENCE

Acts 15 gives a model of discernment.

1. God's Work

Peter describes Cornelius.

Paul and Barnabas describe Gentile conversions.

2. The Holy Spirit

Gentiles received the Spirit.

3. Scripture

James quotes the prophets.

Spiritual Principle

True spiritual discernment never places experience above Scripture.

Experience confirmed what Scripture had already revealed.

XLVIII. WHAT ACTS 15 TEACHES ABOUT CHURCH CONFLICT

Conflict is not automatically evidence of spiritual failure.

Acts 15 contains:

Debate.

Discussion.

Testimony.

Scripture.

Judgment.

Agreement.

Crawford Bible Study Principle

The goal of Christian disagreement should not be victory over one another but submission together to truth.

XLIX. DOCTRINE MATTERS

Why did Paul debate sharply?

Because wrong doctrine can destroy people spiritually.

If sinners believe they must earn justification:

Grace is obscured.

Christ's sufficiency is diminished.

People become trapped in either:

Pride.

Or despair.

Spiritual Principle

Doctrine matters because what we believe about salvation determines where we place our hope.

L. LIBERTY IS NOT LAWLESSNESS

Acts 15 rejects legalism.

But it also rejects immoral living.

Gentile believers are told to avoid:

Idolatry.

Sexual immorality.

Practices damaging fellowship.

Crawford Bible Study Principle

Christian liberty means freedom from earning salvation, not freedom from obeying Christ.

LI. THE LETTER BROUGHT JOY

Why?

Because grace is encouraging.

The believers had been troubled by teachers saying:

You are not enough.

Your faith is not enough.

You need more requirements.

Then the apostolic letter says:

Do not place that burden upon them.

Spiritual Principle

The biblical gospel relieves the crushing burden of self-salvation.

LII. BARNABAS AND MARK — THE MINISTRY OF RESTORATION

Barnabas refuses to define Mark solely by his previous failure.

That decision becomes significant later.

Mark eventually becomes useful in ministry.

Crawford Bible Study Principle

“Do Not Confuse Someone’s Worst Moment With God’s Final Verdict on Their Life.”

Mark failed.

But Mark was not finished.

LIII. PAUL AND MARK — RESTORATION IS POSSIBLE

Years later Paul says:

“Bring Mark with you, because he is useful to me for ministry.”

The disagreement of Acts 15 was not the final chapter.

Spiritual Principle

Christian conflict does not have to become permanent hostility.

People can mature.

Trust can be rebuilt.

Usefulness can return.

LIV. WHAT PAUL TEACHES US

Paul was concerned about mission reliability.

That concern mattered.

Principle

Grace does not mean ignoring responsibility.

Ministry requires:

Commitment.

Faithfulness.

Dependability.

Endurance.

LV. WHAT BARNABAS TEACHES US

Barnabas saw restoration potential.

That mattered too.

Principle

Accountability should leave room for repentance, growth, and restored usefulness.

Healthy ministry needs:

Paul's concern for faithfulness.

And Barnabas' concern for restoration.

LVI. GOD USED BOTH PATHS

Before the disagreement:

One missionary team.

Afterward:

Barnabas and Mark.

Paul and Silas.

Scripture does not praise the sharpness of the disagreement itself.

But God sovereignly continues His mission through imperfect human relationships.

Crawford Bible Study Principle

God's ability to redeem a painful situation does not mean the pain was ideal; it means His mission is greater than our failures.

LVII. SEVEN GREAT LESSONS FROM ACTS 15

1. Salvation Is by Grace

Principle:

We are saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, not by works of law.

2. Hearts Are Purified by Faith

Principle:

God looks deeper than ceremonial identity.

3. Scripture Must Guide Church Decisions

Principle:

Experience must agree with God's revealed Word.

4. Christian Freedom Must Be Holy

Principle:

Grace rejects legalism without embracing immorality.

5. Church Conflict Can Be Resolved Through Truth

Principle:

Careful listening, biblical reasoning, and spiritual humility can restore peace.

6. Godly Leaders Can Disagree

Principle:

Spiritual maturity does not guarantee identical judgment in every practical matter.

7. God's Mission Continues

Principle:

Neither doctrinal controversy nor personal disagreement can stop God when His servants remain faithful.

LVIII. QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS FOR PERSONAL STUDY

Question 1

What false teaching created the controversy in Acts 15?

Some men taught that Gentiles had to be circumcised according to the law of Moses in order to be saved.

This added a human religious requirement to salvation through Christ.

Question 2

Why did Paul and Barnabas oppose this teaching so strongly?

Because it changed the gospel.

If salvation required circumcision and law-keeping in addition to faith in Jesus, salvation would no longer rest entirely upon grace.

Question 3

What evidence did Peter give that God accepted Gentiles?

God gave them the Holy Spirit just as He had given the Spirit to Jewish believers.

Peter said God knew their hearts and purified them by faith.

Question 4

According to Acts 15:11, how are people saved?

Peter declared:

“Through the grace of the Lord Jesus.”

Salvation is received through Christ rather than earned through works of the law.

Question 5

What did Peter mean by calling the law a burden they could not bear?

He was not saying God’s law was evil.

He was saying that sinful people could not perfectly keep the law as a means of achieving justification before God.

Question 6

How did James support Gentile inclusion?

James quoted the prophets and demonstrated that God had foretold that Gentiles would seek the Lord and become a people bearing His name.

Question 7

Why did the council give Gentile believers several practical restrictions?

These were not conditions for earning salvation.

They promoted holiness, separation from idolatry and sexual sin, and peaceful fellowship between Jewish and Gentile believers.

Question 8

What happened when the Antioch believers read the council’s letter?

They rejoiced because the message encouraged them and removed the false burden imposed by unauthorized teachers.

Question 9

Who were Judas and Silas?

They were respected church leaders and prophets sent from Jerusalem to confirm and explain the council's decision.

Question 10

Why did Paul and Barnabas disagree?

Barnabas wanted John Mark to accompany them.

Paul believed Mark should not go because Mark had abandoned the earlier missionary journey.

Question 11

Was John Mark permanently disqualified?

No.

Later New Testament references show Mark restored to useful ministry, and Paul eventually described him as useful.

Question 12

What is the central lesson of Acts 15?

Salvation is by grace through faith in Jesus Christ, not through circumcision or works of the Mosaic law, and the church must protect this gospel while maintaining holiness, unity, and continued mission.

LIX. PERSONAL APPLICATION

Acts 15 asks us several important questions.

Am I Trusting Jesus Alone for Salvation?

Or am I secretly trusting:

My goodness?

My church membership?

My religious background?

My works?

Do I Add Requirements to the Gospel?

The Jerusalem Council refused to do so.

Can I Listen When Others Disagree?

The apostles and elders debated before deciding.

Do I Test Spiritual Experiences by Scripture?

James did.

Do I Confuse Grace With Permission to Sin?

The council did not.

Am I Willing to Encourage People Who Have Failed?

Barnabas was.

Am I Faithful Enough That Others Can Depend Upon Me?

Paul's concern was legitimate.

Can I Continue Serving God After Relational Disappointment?

Paul and Barnabas both did.

LX. A CRAWFORD BIBLE STUDY PRINCIPLE

“Never Add a Human Requirement to What Christ Has Finished”

The false teachers said:

Jesus.

Plus circumcision.

Plus law.

Peter said:

Grace.

Principle

If Christ's work is sufficient, human religious achievement cannot become the missing piece required for justification.

LXI. ANOTHER CRAWFORD BIBLE STUDY PRINCIPLE

“Do Not Make It Difficult for People Who Are Turning to God”

James’ statement should challenge every church.

We can create unnecessary barriers through:

Culture.

Tradition.

Personal preference.

Unbiblical expectations.

Principle

Preach everything God requires, but do not elevate human preference to divine command.

LXII. ANOTHER CRAWFORD BIBLE STUDY PRINCIPLE

“The Bible Must Interpret the Experience”

Peter described what happened.

Paul and Barnabas described miracles.

Then James said:

“This agrees with the words of the prophets.”

Principle

Never build doctrine upon experience alone; bring experience under the authority of Scripture.

LXIII. ANOTHER CRAWFORD BIBLE STUDY PRINCIPLE

“Even Good Men Can Have Sharp Disagreements”

Paul was a faithful apostle.

Barnabas was a faithful encourager.

They disagreed.

Strongly.

Principle

A disagreement does not automatically prove one person is ungodly, but disagreement must never become an excuse for bitterness, slander, or abandoning Christ's mission.

LXIV. FINAL APPLICATION

Acts Chapter 15 begins with a threat to the gospel.

Some teachers were saying:

Faith in Jesus is not enough.

You also need circumcision.

You also need the law.

Paul and Barnabas understood what was at stake.

The question was not:

What cultural practices should Christians prefer?

The question was:

How is a sinner saved?

Peter answers clearly:

God knows the heart.

God gave the Holy Spirit.

God made no distinction.

God purified hearts:

By faith.

And:

“Through the grace of the Lord Jesus we are saved.”

That is the heart of Acts 15.

Grace.

Not merit.

Christ.

Not ceremonial achievement.

Faith.

Not law-keeping as the basis of justification.

But Acts 15 also refuses another error.

Grace does not mean:

Sin does not matter.

The church still calls believers away from:

Idolatry.

Sexual immorality.

Practices damaging Christian fellowship.

Therefore the gospel produces both:

Freedom.

And holiness.

Then the chapter gives us another lesson.

Godly leaders may disagree.

Paul and Barnabas had served together.

They had suffered together.

They had defended grace together.

Yet they disagreed over Mark.

It became sharp.

They separated.

That part of the story should humble us.

Even strong believers remain human.

But the story should also encourage us.

God keeps working.

Barnabas takes Mark.

Paul takes Silas.

Churches are strengthened.

And years later:

Mark is restored.

So Acts 15 tells us:

Protect the gospel.

Reject legalism.

Walk in holiness.

Study Scripture.

Listen carefully.

Seek unity.

Give room for restoration.

Do not let disagreement end your usefulness.

And never forget:

The church belongs to Jesus Christ.

Our salvation depends upon:

His grace.

Our righteousness depends upon:

His work.

Our mission depends upon:

His power.

And our hope rests upon:

Him alone.

Closing Prayer

Heavenly Father,

Thank You for the clarity of Acts Chapter 15.

Thank You that salvation does not depend upon our ability to earn Your favor.

Thank You for the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Thank You that Jesus accomplished what we could never accomplish.

Protect us from legalism.

Keep us from adding human requirements to the gospel.

Help us understand that we are justified through faith in Christ.

Purify our hearts.

Teach us to live in holiness without believing our holiness purchases salvation.

Give our churches wisdom when disagreement comes.

Help us listen carefully.

Help us search the Scriptures.

Help us recognize the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

Keep us from elevating tradition above truth.

Help us never make it unnecessarily difficult for people who are turning to You.

Give us the courage of Paul.

Give us the encouragement of Barnabas.

Give us the faithfulness of Silas.

And give us grace for people like Mark who may fail but can become useful again.

When believers disagree, keep us from bitterness.

When relationships change, keep the mission moving.

Strengthen Your churches.

Protect the gospel.

Bring sinners to faith.

Build unity between believers from every background.

And let our confidence always rest in this truth:

We are saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ.

In Jesus' name, Amen.

Key Verse

“We believe it is through the grace of the Lord Jesus that we are saved, just as they are.” — Acts 15:11

Central Truth

God saves both Jew and Gentile entirely through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and purifies hearts by faith, so the church must reject legalistic additions to the gospel while pursuing holiness, biblical unity, wise leadership, restoration, and continued mission.

Acts 15 in One Sentence

The Jerusalem church rejects the claim that Gentile believers must be circumcised and keep the Mosaic law to be saved, affirming that salvation comes through the grace of Jesus Christ and hearts are purified by faith, while practical instructions promote holiness and fellowship, and even after Paul and Barnabas separate over John Mark, God's mission continues as the churches are strengthened.