

REFLECTION GUIDE

ACTS 15:1-35 | BY GRACE ALONE

KEY TERMS

The Law of Moses - The law God gave to Israel in the OT books in order to reveal himself to his people, set Israel apart from the other nations and guide them to flourishing, and teach mankind about sin and the need for atonement.

Putting God to the test - An OT idiom that has the sense of "hindering God's purposes" (see Ex 17:2, Deut 6:16, & Ps 95:9).

Judas and Silas - Judas was a common 1st century Jewish name and this particular Judas is only mentioned here. Silas, also called Silvanus, is first mentioned here in Acts 15 but will travel with Paul (Acts 15-18) and co-write the letters to the Thessalonians (see 1 Thess 1:1 & 2 Thess 1:1).

DID YOU KNOW?

By the time of the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15 it has been 10-15 years since Peter's vision and Cornelius' conversion in Acts 10 and 15-25 years after Jesus' death and resurrection.

BACKGROUND

While in Antioch, a group comes from Judea teaching that *unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved* (v. 1). This leads to a disagreement with Paul and Barnabas, who were not telling Gentiles they needed to be circumcised in order to be saved. Ultimately Paul and Barnabas travel to Jerusalem to meet with other church leaders. This meeting, called the Jerusalem Council is the first historical church council and the only one recorded in Scripture.

During the meeting, Peter speaks first and reminds the leaders *that in the early days God made a choice among you, that by my mouth the Gentiles should hear the word of the gospel and believe* (v. 7, see Acts 10). Peter claims that God has *made no distinction* (v. 9) between Jews and Gentiles who trust Jesus and then asks why Gentiles need to be circumcised and keep the law, when the Jews themselves can't even keep the law. The conclusion of Peter's speech is that *we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will* (v. 11). The rest of the leaders appear to agree with Peter and James adds his own support by citing Amos 9:11-12 as evidence that it was always God's plan to include Gentiles in his new people without reservation. The leaders then decide to send a letter to the churches indicating that Gentiles do not need to be circumcised and keep the law to be saved; instead, they, like the Jews, are saved by grace through faith in Jesus. However, they do ask Gentiles to *abstain from what has been sacrificed to idols, and from blood, and from what has been strangled, and from sexual immorality* (v. 29). This request is not because the church leaders believe Gentiles need to do these things in order to be saved, but these practices were associated with pagan temple worship and were appalling to Jews and so for the sake of unity they ask the Gentiles to avoid these practices.

GOING DEEPER

Read Ephesians 2:8-10, James 2:14-17, and Romans 6:1-4. How do these verses affirm the decision from Acts 15 that salvation is by grace alone? What do they teach about the role of works in salvation? What do they teach about sin in a Christian's life?

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

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LEARNING THE WORD

1. Read Acts 15:1-35. What jumps out to you from this story? What's surprising or confusing?
2. What is the nature of the disagreement in verses 1-5 that leads to the Jerusalem Council and why was it serious enough to warrant a Church council?
3. In verses 7-11, Peter argues that Gentiles do not need to be circumcised and keep the law in order to be saved, but are saved by grace alone. How does Peter frame his argument? What evidence does he cite in favor of his position?
4. What does verse 28 reveal about how the Jerusalem Council came to their decision?

LIVING THE WORD

5. What is your first natural reaction when you see a church or Christian do or say something you disagree with? How does the example of the Christians in Acts 15 challenge you?
6. In what ways are you tempted to try to be your own savior? How does the gospel of grace free you from the burden of saving yourself?
7. How does salvation by grace alone affect how you relate to Christians from different backgrounds or with different beliefs on secondary matters than your own? How does salvation by grace alone affect how you relate to non-Christians?
8. What is most encouraging to you about the gospel message that salvation is by grace *alone*?