

**As God's people, we want to be guided by His Word and empowered by His Spirit to look more like Jesus.
This Scripture Guide is based on this morning's passage to further equip you with what God's Word says.**

Scripture Guide Acts 15:1-35

This section follows Paul and Barnabas' return to Antioch. They had completed their first missionary Journey (~44-46 AD). The Antioch church gathered to celebrate what God had done through their efforts and how he had "opened a door of faith to the Gentiles" (14:27). God is drawing the nations to Himself as promised far back as Abraham in Genesis 12:1-3. The Gentiles, who were not formerly associated with Israel, are joining God's people. However, because of this, the church finds itself in theological controversy. New questions have arisen: *Does salvation require adherence to Moses's instructions in the Law? Are the customs of the Jewish people necessary for Gentile believers?*

15:1-5 Judean teachers came to Antioch and questioned the Gentile Christians' salvation. They claimed that believers in Jesus had to be circumcised and keep the Law¹ of Moses. They believed this practice should be upheld since circumcision² is the identity marker of Israel and the sign of the people of God. Paul and Barnabas were well-versed in *Torah* and Rabbinic traditions, and they debated this at length with the group infiltrating the church. It appears that "men from Judea" were teaching the Law in a way that contradicted the message of Jesus, causing a great dissension³ between them and Paul.

After this debate, Paul and Barnabas seek clarity on this issue by going to the church in Jerusalem where the apostles reside, that is, the people who spent time with Jesus - Peter, James, and John.⁴ As they traveled, they told other disciples in Phoenicia and Samaria what had happened with the Gentiles coming to faith in Jesus. We can draw from their silence that the Christians in Phoenicia and Samaria are not concerned with whether or not the Gentiles ought to adhere to the Law of Moses and Jewish traditions. The Phoenician and Samaritan reaction can be contrasted with the objections of the Pharisees in v. 5. It should be noted that the Pharisees are also in the midst of the church in Jerusalem.⁵ Their response implies they do not take issue with the Gentiles accepting Jesus as the Davidic Messiah. They take issue with whether or not Gentiles must follow Mosaic Law and traditional customs.

15:6-12 After much debate and discussion with the other apostles, Peter seems to break the theological stalemate. Peter declares that he and the other apostles were witnesses to the fact that God gave the Gentiles the Holy Spirit, "just as He did to us" (v. 8). He says that there is no longer any "distinction between them and us" (v. 9). The Gentiles are on the same footing and same privileged position before God. The qualification now of being a part of God's people is not circumcision but rather "having cleansed their hearts by faith" (v. 9). To drive the point further, Peter says that requiring believers to keep the Mosaic Law is both putting God to the test and "placing a yoke⁶ on the neck" of the Gentile believers.⁷ This yoke was one that neither Jewish nor Gentile sinners could carry (v. 10). The yoke would require nothing less than perfect obedience to the Law of Moses. Yet the gospel promise is salvation based on grace through Jesus (v. 11), not one of man-wrought works of obedience.

¹ Νόμος – nom'-os – law, a translation of the Hebrew תּוֹרָה – tôrâ – Deuteronomic or Mosaic Law, instruction, or customs or manner of life. The *Torah* was near and dear to the heart of God's people. It consisted in the first five books of the Hebrew Bible. The *Torah* narrative told the story of the origins of humanity, humanity's descent into sin and the Lord's redemptive action to bring humanity back to Himself by first redeeming the nation of Israel. *Torah* contained moral, ceremonial/sacrificial, and civil law embedded within narrative. The laws and instructions were how Israel was to practice being a holy people, remain in the land, and enjoy the special blessings of being God's covenant people. The intended result was that Israel would serve as a light to the rest of the world. The ceremonial and sacrificial system as laid out fully in Exodus and Leviticus was the means by which Israel individually and collectively confessed their sin and covenant unfaithfulness to the Lord. Yet, ultimately, the sacrificial system could not take away their sins or cleanse the conscience of the people, see Hebrews 10:1-4.

² Circumcision plays a significant and defining role within *Torah* going back to its institution with Abraham in Genesis 17:13.

³ στάσις – stas'-is – harsh debate, strife, dissention (Acts 23:7), or an uproar or insurrection (Acts 24:5; Mark 15:7)

⁴ Paul gives a parallel account of this scene also in Galatians 2:4-10.

⁵ This is perhaps the only instance in Acts that mentions that some of Pharisees had become believers in Jesus. The Pharisees were not a monolithic group. Though many instances in Acts and the Gospels show the Pharisees opposed Jesus and the gospel message, some (notably Nicodemus) believed in Jesus (John 3:1, 19:39). Other places in the NT mention the Judaisers, the circumcision party, and other groups that seem to have overlapping sensibilities.

⁶ ζυγός – dzoo-gos' – metaphorically a burden or bondage of slavery (Parallel with Gal 5:1; see Matt 11:30 as counter-example)

⁷ Paul gives further teaching connecting circumcision to righteousness according to the law in Rom 2:25-29; 4:9-12, & Gal 5:2-6.

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15:13-18 Now James, the lead elder of the Jerusalem church, speaks up on the matter, and he supports Peter's rationale. James quotes the prophet, Amos, affirming that Jesus is not just the Messiah of the Jews but for the whole world. James highlights from the prophet that God has called people "from among the Gentiles" (Amos 9:12) to join the people⁸ of God. In this way, God is fulfilling his promise to Israel to "rebuild the tabernacle of David" (v. 16, Amos 9:11). The people of God will not exclude the Gentiles because there are those "who are called by My name." Bringing the nations into David's house will be what restores the ruins of God's chosen dwelling place.

Underlying Peter's and James' declaration is that Jesus is the Lord and Messiah, not just for the Jewish people but for all nations. Jesus the Messiah fulfills the Hebrew Bible not just for those in the lineage of Abraham, but He fulfills the promises to the nation of Israel, which includes drawing the nations, non-Jews, to Himself (Gen 17:4, 1 Chr 16:31, Isa 49:6). Both Jew and non-Jew are brought into the people of God not through adherence to works of the Law but by faith in Jesus as the Messiah.⁹

15:19-21 James goes on to say that because God has chosen Gentiles as His chosen people, the church's leaders should not burden them with further requirements. They have been saved by grace (v. 11), and they are now clean, not unclean, by faith (v.9, Acts 11:9). Nevertheless, James provides the prescription for one set of regulations that the Gentiles should maintain.

15:22- 29 This settled the matter for the leaders in Jerusalem; they now had one mind¹⁰ (v. 25). They commissioned Judas and Silas as prophetic messengers to continue building up the Antiochian church and sent a letter along with them. The letter was intended to calm what the errant teachers had disturbed and unsettled (v. 24). The requirements¹¹ given in v. 28 are not to commit sexual immorality and not eat any food sacrificed to idols, or strangled, or with blood still in it. *Why were these four requirements chosen?* There are at least two reasons why these are given. One is that the Gentiles should be concerned with living distinctively set apart from the world—their current Greco-Roman, pagan culture. The second is that they are to live in community with their fellow Jewish Christians. Jewish dietary and ceremonial customs were deeply rooted and would have affected how they shared table¹² fellowship with the new Gentile Christians. In either case, the Gentiles are to see themselves representing Jesus to their Jewish and non-Jewish neighbors. And they are to live still holy and set apart as God's people.

15:30-35 The letter was delivered by Barnabas and Paul, and the result was that the church rejoiced because of the encouragement and help they received. The answer to troubles is: that they are welcomed into the people of God by faith in the Messiah – not by keeping the customs of Moses. They are saved from their sins by Jesus' work and fulfillment of the Law rather than by their own keeping of the Mosaic Law. They are free now to worship God with a clean heart and a clean conscience before their Jewish and Gentile neighbors.

Application

The first Gentile Christian church has lessons for us to remember today. The heart of the gospel is the same for us as it was the Antiochian church. We can come to Jesus to have our hearts cleaned by faith and be saved by his grace. All of this is apart from our works, or even by adopting a new set of cultural practices. Yet for us today, who don't live in a mixed Jew and Gentile community, the requirements given to the Antiochian church may seem odd. Yet the central matter for us is the same as them, a heart forgiven of sin and cleaned by Jesus' blood results in a new and holy life. This takes practical shape in our lives individually, by setting ourselves apart from our former sinful habits, and joining together with those who follow Jesus, no matter their former background and culture.

⁸ What James says is nearly an invocation of Deut 14:2, but the nations and Israel are reversed.

⁹ Paul makes the same point in Romans 4:13-14. Abraham was made right with God not through circumcision but through faith in God's promises prior to circumcision.

¹⁰ ὁμοθυμαδὸν - *hom-oth-oo-mad-on* - with one mind or one passion, to rush along in unison, operating like a symphony

¹¹ ἐπιναγκες - *ep-an'-ang-kes* - necessity, imposed either by compulsion, or circumstances, or by law of duty regarding custom.

¹² Paul answers whether it is right to eat unclean foods or foods sacrificed to idols. See Rom 14:13-17 and 1 Cor 8:4-13.