

ACTS: THE STORY CONTINUES

Week 20: Acts 15 - Saved by Grace

The Question Before the Church

The first missionary journey has ended. Paul and Barnabas have returned to Antioch after seeing God establish new churches among the Gentiles.

But the growth of the Gentile Church has forced an enormously important question:
Must Gentiles become Jewish in order to be saved by the Jewish Messiah?

Acts 15 records how the early Church wrestled with that question and came to understand more clearly what God had already been revealing:

We are saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus.

1. PUTTING THE STORY TOGETHER

Acts 11–15 and Galatians

Luke records the unfolding history of the early Church in Acts, but he doesn't tell us everything that happened between the events he records. Paul's letters sometimes allow us to see events and conversations that Luke doesn't include.

By placing Acts alongside Galatians, we can construct a reasonable timeline that helps us understand how the controversy of Acts 15 developed.

The Bible doesn't give us exact dates for all of these events. The following timeline represents a likely reconstruction based on comparing the biblical accounts.

Paul and Barnabas Go to Jerusalem

Read: Acts 11:27–30

'Now in these days prophets came down from Jerusalem to Antioch. And one of them named Agabus stood up and foretold by the Spirit that there would be a great famine over all the world (this took place in the days of Claudius). So the disciples determined, every one according to his ability, to send relief to the brothers living in Judea. And they did so, sending it to the elders by the hand of Barnabas and Saul.'

- A prophet named Agabus warns that a severe famine is coming. The believers in Antioch collect financial relief for the Christians living in Judea and send it with Barnabas and Saul.

Paul describes an early visit to Jerusalem in:

Read: Galatians 2:1–10

'Then after fourteen years I went up again to Jerusalem with Barnabas, taking Titus along with me. I went up because of a revelation and set before them (though privately before those who seemed influential) the gospel that I proclaim among the Gentiles, in order to make sure I was not running or had not run in vain. But even Titus, who was with me, was not forced to be circumcised, though he was a Greek. Yet because of false brothers secretly brought in—who slipped in to spy out our freedom that we have in Christ Jesus, so that they might bring us into slavery—to them we did not yield in submission even for a moment, so that the truth of the gospel might be preserved for you. And from those who seemed to be influential (what they were makes no difference to me; God shows no partiality)—those, I say, who seemed influential added nothing to me. On the contrary, when they saw that I had been entrusted with the gospel to the uncircumcised, just as Peter had been entrusted with the gospel to the circumcised (for he who worked through Peter for his apostolic ministry to the circumcised worked also through me for mine to the Gentiles), and when James and Cephas and John, who seemed to be pillars, perceived the grace that was given to me, they gave the right hand of fellowship to Barnabas and me, that we should go to the Gentiles and they to the circumcised. Only, they asked us to remember the poor, the very thing I was eager to do.'

- Paul travels with Barnabas and takes Titus, a Gentile believer, with him. He meets with James, Peter, and John, who recognize God's work through Paul among the Gentiles.
- Significantly, **Titus is not required to be circumcised.**
- In our timeline, we understand this as the famine-relief visit—not the later Jerusalem Council of Acts 15.

Persecution in Jerusalem

Acts 12:1–19

- Herod Agrippa I begins persecuting the Church. James, the brother of John, is executed, and Peter is arrested.
- God miraculously releases Peter from prison.
- After visiting the believers gathered at Mary's house, Peter leaves Jerusalem.

Read: Acts 12:17

'But motioning to them with his hand to be silent, he described to them how the Lord had brought him out of the prison. And he said, "Tell these things to James and to the brothers." Then he departed and went to another place.'

- Luke tells us only that Peter went to **“another place.”** We do not know where he went.
- At some later point, however, Galatians tells us that Peter came to Antioch.

Paul and Barnabas Return to Antioch

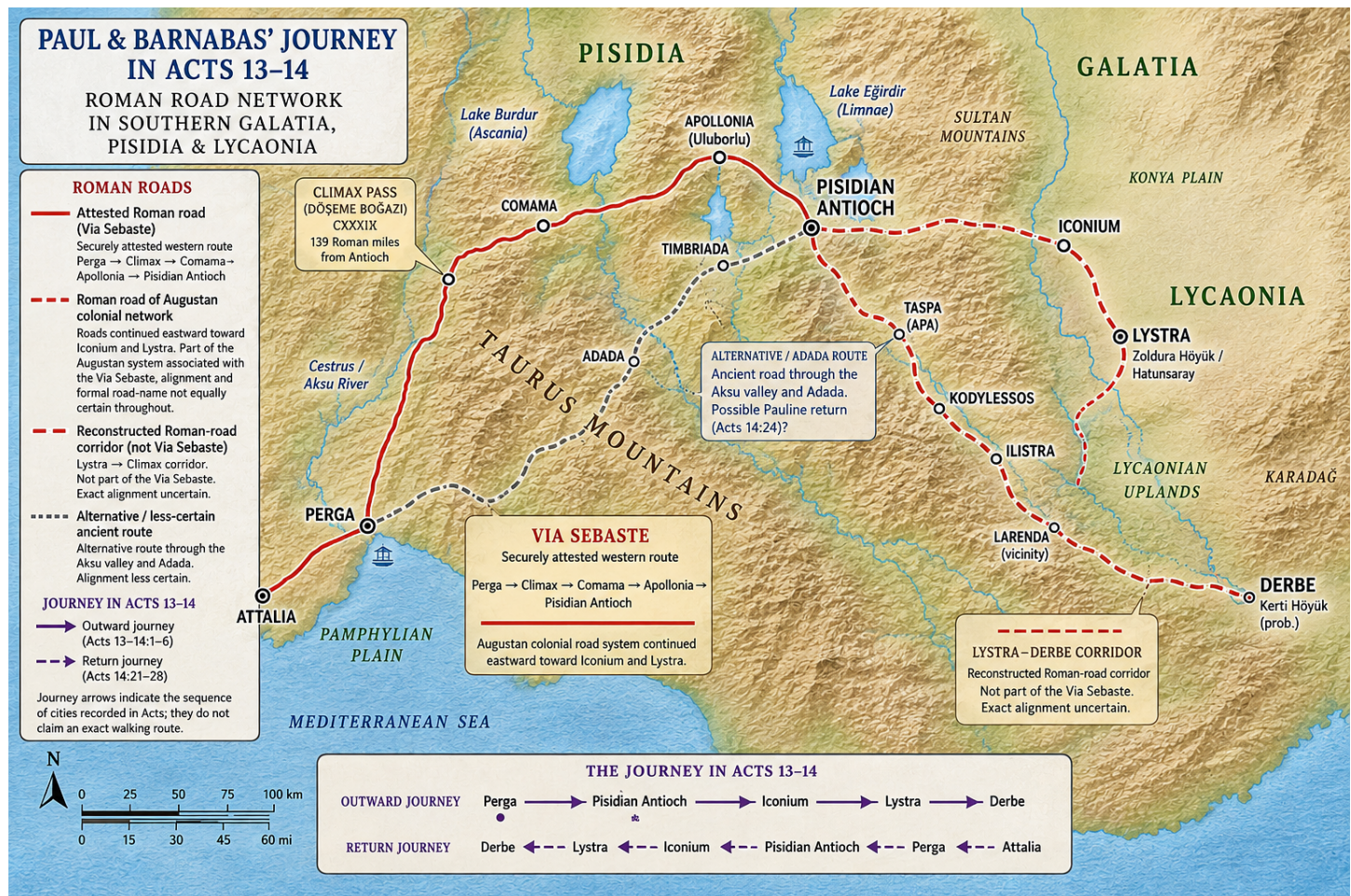
Read: Acts 12:25; 13:1–3

'And Barnabas and Saul returned from Jerusalem when they had completed their service, bringing with them John, whose other name was Mark.'

- Paul and Barnabas return to Antioch after completing their relief mission.
- The Holy Spirit then calls them to a new work, and the church sends them out.
- This begins the missionary journey we have followed through Acts 13–14.

The First Missionary Journey

Acts 14:21–28



Paul and Barnabas establish churches among the Gentiles and eventually return to Syrian Antioch.

Among the cities where churches have been established are:

Pisidian Antioch → Iconium → Lystra → Derbe

Luke tells us that after returning home:

Read: Acts 14:28

'And they remained no little time with the disciples.'

They remain in Antioch for **“no little time.”**

Luke does not tell us everything that happened during this period, but Galatians helps us fill in part of the story.

2. TROUBLE IN ANTIOCH

At some point, Peter also comes to Antioch.

We cannot know precisely when he arrived, but Paul tells us what happened while he was there.

Read: Galatians 2:11–16

'But when Cephas came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he stood condemned. For before certain men came from James, he was eating with the Gentiles; but when they came he drew back and separated himself, fearing the circumcision party. And the rest of the Jews acted hypocritically along with him, so that even Barnabas was led astray by their hypocrisy. But when I saw that their conduct was not in step with the truth of the gospel, I said to Cephas before them all, "If you, though a Jew, live like a Gentile and not like a Jew, how can you force the Gentiles to live like Jews?" We ourselves are Jews by birth and not Gentile sinners; yet we know that a person is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ, so we also have believed in Christ Jesus, in order to be justified by faith in Christ and not by works of the law, because by works of the law no one will be justified.'

Peter has been freely eating with Gentile Christians.

This is significant. Peter had already witnessed God give the Holy Spirit to Cornelius and his household. He understood that God had received Gentiles who believed in Jesus.

Then certain men arrive **“from James.” (see below)**

Peter becomes concerned about the reaction of the circumcision group and begins withdrawing from fellowship with the Gentile believers.

Other Jewish Christians follow his example.

Even Barnabas is drawn into the separation.

Paul publicly confronts Peter because their behavior is communicating something about the gospel:

If God has accepted these Gentile believers through faith in Jesus, how can Jewish believers treat them as though they still do not fully belong?

Something to Consider

- The fact that these men came “**from James**” does not necessarily mean that James authorized what they were teaching.
- Later, the Jerusalem church will specifically address this.

Read: Acts 15:24

'Since we have heard that some persons have gone out from us and troubled you with words, unsettling your minds, although we gave them no instructions'

3. TROUBLE IN GALATIA

The problem is not limited to Antioch.

Paul receives disturbing news concerning the churches he and Barnabas have recently established.

We do not know how the news reached Paul, but his letter makes clear that something serious is happening.

Read: Galatians 1:6–9

'I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting him who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel— not that there is another one, but there are some who trouble you and want to distort the gospel of Christ. But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel contrary to the one we preached to you, let him be accursed. As we have said before, so now I say again: If anyone is preaching to you a gospel contrary to the one you received, let him be accursed.'

Teachers are influencing these new Gentile believers and Paul believes their message threatens the gospel itself.

Remember who these people are.

They are the believers in the communities Paul and Barnabas had recently risked their lives to reach.

Pisidian Antioch.

Iconium.

Lystra.

Derbe.

Now these Christians are being told that faith in Jesus is not enough.

The question is becoming clear:

- Is salvation received through faith in Jesus, or must Gentiles also be circumcised and come under the Law of Moses?

4. PAUL WRITES TO THE GALATIANS

- Our timeline places the writing of Galatians during this period, probably around **AD 48–49**, after Paul's first missionary journey but before the Jerusalem Council.
- Paul writes urgently to defend the gospel he had preached to these churches.

Read: Galatians 2:15–21

'We ourselves are Jews by birth and not Gentile sinners; yet we know that a person is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ, so we also have believed in Christ Jesus, in order to be justified by faith in Christ and not by works of the law, because by works of the law no one will be justified. But if, in our endeavor to be justified in Christ, we too were found to be sinners, is Christ then a servant of sin? Certainly not! For if I rebuild what I tore down, I prove myself to be a transgressor. For through the law I died to the law, so that I might live to God. I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. I do not nullify the grace of God, for if righteousness were through the law, then Christ died for no purpose.'

Read: Galatians 5:1–6

'For freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery. Look: I, Paul, say to you that if you accept circumcision, Christ will be of no advantage to you. I testify again to every man who accepts circumcision that he is obligated to keep the whole law. You are severed from Christ, you who would be justified by the

law; you have fallen away from grace. For through the Spirit, by faith, we ourselves eagerly wait for the hope of righteousness.'

There is an important reason for placing Galatians before the Jerusalem Council.

Galatians repeatedly addresses circumcision, the Law of Moses, Gentile inclusion, and justification by faith.

Yet Paul never mentions the decision of the Jerusalem Council.

Acts 15 will show us that the apostles and elders addressed these very questions and sent their conclusion to the Gentile churches **in writing**.

Paul's silence makes good sense if:

The Jerusalem Council had not happened yet.

5. THE CRISIS COMES TO A HEAD

Now we arrive at Acts 15.

Read: Acts 15:1–5

“But some men came down from Judea and were teaching the brothers, “Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.” And after Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and debate with them, Paul and Barnabas and some of the others were appointed to go up to Jerusalem to the apostles and the elders about this question. So, being sent on their way by the church, they passed through both Phoenicia and Samaria, describing in detail the conversion of the Gentiles, and brought great joy to all the brothers. When they came to Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the church and the apostles and the elders, and they declared all that God had done with them. But some believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees rose up and said, “It is necessary to circumcise them and to order them to keep the law of Moses.”

Notice exactly what the teachers from Judea are claiming:

- **Without circumcision, the Gentiles cannot be saved.**

They are not simply asking Gentile Christians to respect a Jewish tradition.

- They are making circumcision a **requirement for salvation**.

We should understand why this question was difficult for Jewish believers.

- Jesus was Israel's Messiah.
- The Scriptures had been entrusted to Israel.
- God's covenant promises had been given to Israel.
- Circumcision had been given to Abraham as the sign of God's covenant.
- It therefore seemed reasonable to some Jewish Christians that Gentiles coming to Israel's Messiah should enter God's people in the traditional way.

But God had already done something they could not ignore.

- **He had given the Gentiles the Holy Spirit without first requiring them to become Jews.**

Paul and Barnabas strongly oppose the teaching, and the church sends them to Jerusalem to bring the question before the apostles and elders.

6. PETER — WHAT HAS GOD ALREADY DONE?

Read: Acts 15:6–11

'The apostles and the elders were gathered together to consider this matter. And after there had been much debate, Peter stood up and said to them, "Brothers, you know 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. And God, who knows the heart, bore witness to them, by giving them the Holy Spirit just as he did to us, and he made no distinction between us and them, having cleansed their hearts by faith. Now, therefore, why are you putting God to the test by placing a yoke on the neck of the disciples that neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear? But we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will."

Peter reminds the church of something they already know.

- God had sent him to preach the gospel to Gentiles.
- God had given those Gentiles the Holy Spirit.
- God had made no distinction between Jew and Gentile.
- God had cleansed their hearts **by faith**.

Peter's argument is powerful: **If God has already accepted them, why should we place another requirement upon them?**

Peter then asks why they would place a yoke upon the Gentiles that neither they nor their ancestors had been able to bear.

- Peter is not saying that God's Law was bad.

- He is recognizing that sinful people cannot make themselves righteous before God through their obedience.

Peter's Conclusion

Acts 15:11

'But we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will.'

Notice what Peter does **not** say: *"The Gentiles can be saved just like us."*

Instead, he says that **we will be saved just like them.**

Jew and Gentile stand on exactly the same ground before God: **the grace of the Lord Jesus.**

7. PAUL AND BARNABAS — WHAT IS GOD DOING?

Read: Acts 15:12

'And all the assembly fell silent, and they listened to Barnabas and Paul as they related what signs and wonders God had done through them among the Gentiles.'

Luke gives us only a short summary of their testimony. But we already know the stories they told. We have spent the last several weeks watching God work among the Gentiles.

- Paul and Barnabas had seen people believe.
- They had seen churches established.
- They had seen God perform signs and wonders.

Their testimony confirms Peter's argument: **God is already at work among the Gentiles.**

The Church is not deciding whether God *should* accept these people.

They are recognizing that **God already has.**

8. JAMES — WHAT DID GOD SAY HE WOULD DO?

Read: Acts 15:13–21

'After they finished speaking, James replied, "Brothers, listen to me. Simeon has related how God first visited the Gentiles, to take from them a people for his name. And with this the words of the prophets agree, just as it is written," "After this I will return, and I will rebuild the tent of David that has fallen; I will rebuild its ruins, and I will restore it, that the remnant of mankind may seek the Lord, and all the Gentiles who are called by my name, says the Lord,

who makes these things known from of old.’ Therefore my judgment is that we should not trouble those of the Gentiles who turn to God, but should write to them to abstain from the things polluted by idols, and from sexual immorality, and from what has been strangled, and from blood. For from ancient generations Moses has had in every city those who proclaim him, for he is read every Sabbath in the synagogues.”

- James now turns everyone's attention to Scripture.

Read: Amos 9:11–12

“In that day I will raise up the booth of David that is fallen and repair its breaches, and raise up its ruins and rebuild it as in the days of old, that they may possess the remnant of Edom and all the nations who are called by my name,” declares the Lord who does this.’

- The salvation of the Gentiles is not something God suddenly decided to do.
- The prophets had anticipated a day when the nations would be called by the name of the Lord.

Notice how the testimony comes together:

- **Peter:** Look at what God **has done**.
- **Paul and Barnabas:** Look at what God **is doing**.
- **James:** Look at what God **said he would do**.

God's work among the Gentiles agrees with God's Word because **the same God is responsible for both**.

James therefore concludes:

Read: Acts 15:19

‘Therefore my judgment is that we should not trouble those of the Gentiles who turn to God’

- The Church should not place unnecessary barriers in the way of Gentiles who are turning to God.

9. THEN WHY GIVE THEM FOUR REQUIREMENTS?

Read: Acts 15:22–29

‘Then it seemed good to the apostles and the elders, with the whole church, to choose men from among them and send them to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas. They sent Judas called Barsabbas, and Silas, leading men among the brothers, with the following letter: “The brothers, both the apostles and the elders, to the brothers who are of the Gentiles in Antioch

and Syria and Cilicia, greetings. Since we have heard that some persons have gone out from us and troubled you with words, unsettling your minds, although we gave them no instructions, it has seemed good to us, having come to one accord, to choose men and send them to you with our beloved Barnabas and Paul, men who have risked their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. We have therefore sent Judas and Silas, who themselves will tell you the same things by word of mouth. For it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to lay on you no greater burden than these requirements: that you abstain from what has been sacrificed to idols, and from blood, and from what has been strangled, and from sexual immorality. If you keep yourselves from these, you will do well. Farewell.”

- The council does not require Gentiles to be circumcised or to place themselves under the Law of Moses in order to be saved.

But it does give them four instructions:

- Abstain from things associated with idols.
- Abstain from blood.
- Abstain from animals that have been strangled.
- Abstain from sexual immorality.

Why these four?

There appears to be an important connection with **Leviticus 17–18**, where instructions are given concerning both Israelites and foreigners living among them.

Read: Leviticus 17:7–14

'So they shall no more sacrifice their sacrifices to goat demons, after whom they whore. This shall be a statute forever for them throughout their generations. "And you shall say to them, Any one of the house of Israel, or of the strangers who sojourn among them, who offers a burnt offering or sacrifice and does not bring it to the entrance of the tent of meeting to offer it to the Lord, that man shall be cut off from his people. "If any one of the house of Israel or of the strangers who sojourn among them eats any blood, I will set my face against that person who eats blood and will cut him off from among his people. For the life of the flesh is in the blood, and I have given it for you on the altar to make atonement for your souls, for it is the blood that makes atonement by the life. Therefore I have said to the people of Israel, No person among you shall eat blood, neither shall any stranger who sojourns among you eat blood. "Any one also of the people of Israel, or of the strangers who sojourn among them, who takes in hunting any beast or bird that may be eaten shall pour out its blood and cover it with earth. For the life of every creature is its blood: its blood is its life. Therefore I have said to the people of Israel, You shall not eat the blood of any creature, for the life of every creature is its blood. Whoever eats it shall be cut off.'

Read: Leviticus 17:15–16

'And every person who eats what dies of itself or what is torn by beasts, whether he is a native or a sojourner, shall wash his clothes and bathe himself in water and be unclean until the evening; then he shall be clean. But if he does not wash them or bathe his flesh, he shall bear his iniquity.'

Read: Leviticus 18:24–26

"Do not make yourselves unclean by any of these things, for by all these the nations I am driving out before you have become unclean, and the land became unclean, so that I punished its iniquity, and the land vomited out its inhabitants. But you shall keep my statutes and my rules and do none of these abominations, either the native or the stranger who sojourns among you'

These passages address many of the same concerns:

Idolatrous sacrifice — Blood — Improperly killed animals — Sexual immorality

- The council is not giving the Gentiles **four additional requirements for salvation**.
- Gentile Christians are being called to leave their pagan worship and sexual immorality behind while also learning to live in loving fellowship with Jewish Christians.

Read: Acts 15:21

'For from ancient generations Moses has had in every city those who proclaim him, for he is read every Sabbath in the synagogues.'

Jewish and Gentile believers will now worship together, eat together, and live as one family in Christ.

Christian freedom does not mean:

"I can do whatever I want."

Grace changes both our relationship **with God** and our relationship **with one another**

10. SAVED BY GRACE

Read: Acts 15:30–35

'So when they were sent off, they went down to Antioch, and having gathered the congregation together, they delivered the letter. And when they had read it, they rejoiced because of its encouragement. And Judas and Silas, who were themselves prophets, encouraged and strengthened the brothers with many words. And after they had spent some time, they were sent off in peace by the brothers to those who had sent them. But Paul and Barnabas remained in Antioch, teaching and preaching the word of the Lord, with many others also.'

Notice how the Gentile believers respond when they receive the council's letter.

- **They rejoice.**

They have not been given another religious system they must fulfill before God will accept them. The Church has affirmed what God has already demonstrated:

- **They belong to Jesus.**
- They do not need to become Jewish first.
- They do not need circumcision to complete their salvation.
- They cannot earn their place among God's people.

Jew and Gentile alike are saved in exactly the same way:

Acts 15:11

'But we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will.'

- **Through the grace of the Lord Jesus.**

Questions for Discussion

- 1. Why was requiring circumcision more serious than simply asking Gentile believers to observe another religious tradition?**
- 2. What evidence does Peter give that God had already accepted the Gentiles?**
- 3. If good works do not save us, what place should obedience and good works have in the life of someone who has been saved by grace?**

The Story So Far

Jerusalem

Famine-relief visit — Acts 11–12 / Galatians 2:1–10

First Missionary Journey

Gentile churches established — Acts 13–14

Antioch & Galatia

The controversy over Gentile inclusion grows — Galatians 1–2

Galatians Written

Paul defends the gospel of grace — approximately AD 48–49

Antioch

“Unless you are circumcised... you cannot be saved.” — Acts 15:1

Jerusalem

The apostles and elders gather — Acts 15

“We believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus.”