



# PRESERVING FREEDOM FOR ALL

*SERIES: ACTS - LIFE UNLEASHED*

Acts 15:1–35

31st Message

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Being that today is Father's Day, I thought it would good to consider, What is our heavenly Father's greatest concern as he looks upon his world? I suspect that near the top of his list would be the children of Syria. The UNHCR, the UN Refugee Agency reports:

- 13.5 million people in Syria need humanitarian assistance.
- 6.3 million have been displaced within Syria; half of those affected are children, who are at risk of becoming ill, malnourished, abused or exploited; millions have been forced to quit school.
- Over 5 million people have fled Syria since 2011.
- Most Syrian refugees remain in the Middle East, in Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq, and Egypt; slightly more than 10% of refugees have fled to Europe.

Though 10% seems like a small percentage, the sudden influx of tens of thousands of refugees has been overwhelming to infrastructures and provoked intense controversy that has polarized public opinion. After over a million refugees arrived in Germany in 2015, half the Germans polled said they felt like strangers in their own country. Many nationals say that they no longer feel safe in their hometowns and last year an average of nearly 10 attacks a day were carried out on refugees. The political and social issues are obviously immense and complex, but the fear of having your country and culture taken over by a sudden influx of foreigners was similar to what the Jews were experiencing with the massive influx of Gentiles who came to faith during Paul and Barnabas's first missionary journey.

It all began in chapter 10 when Peter's welcome embrace of Roman Centurion Cornelius into the faith triggered a great struggle for those in leadership, demanding a radical redefinition of what it means to be the people of God and a willingness to let go of their privileged status and national identity. When the leaders in Jerusalem heard the facts of the situation they praised God. Next was the advance of the gospel in Syrian Antioch, when great number of Greeks believed. When the Jerusalem church heard about it, they sent Barnabas to investigate and, seeing what had happened, he rejoiced. The third development was in Cyprus during Paul and Barnabas' first missionary journey. Having heard favorable reports about the impact that Barnabas and Saul were making in his territory, the Roman proconsul Sergius Paulus invited them to his residence eager "to hear the word of God." When he saw the power of God's Spirit subdue his magician Elymas with blindness, he believed. But then in Pisidian Antioch, when Gentiles turned out in huge numbers, the Jews felt threatened and began reviling them. Paul and Barnabas boldly responded to their refusal to believe that they were "turning to the Gentiles" that they "may bring salvation to the ends of the earth." Though opposition continued to escalate wherever they went, many Jews and Gentiles believed and when they returned to Syrian Antioch they announced how God "had opened a door of faith to the Gentiles" (14:27).

Today we come to the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15. It is a chapter that is dense with emotion and drama and has been labeled

by scholars as the "turning point," "centerpiece" and watershed of the book. What takes place here will establish once and for all what constitutes the people of God.

## I. The Challenge to Freedom

**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. (15:1–2 ESV)**

Sadly, the joyous celebration and unity of Spirit the church in Antioch enjoyed was crushed by a delegation from Jerusalem, who challenged the status of the Gentile believers. Assuming that Paul's letter to the Galatians was written to the churches Paul and Barnabas had just visited, it is likely that the men Luke is describing here are "certain men [who] came from James" (Gal 2:12). As John Stott observes,

Not that James had actually sent them, for he later disclaims this, but that was their boast. They were trying to set two apostles against each other, claiming James as their champion and framing Paul as their opponent.<sup>1</sup>

They were teaching "Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved" and that "it is necessary... to keep the law of Moses" (v. 5). There was no question that the prophets announced that, with the coming of the Messiah and Israel's restoration, the Gentiles would be saved (Isa 2:2; 11:10; 56:7; 60:3–22; Zech 8:23). But now through Paul's peaching, Gentiles were flooding in and being welcomed into fellowship by baptism without circumcision. In other words, they were becoming Christians without becoming Jews, retaining their own identity as members of other nations. It was one thing for the Jerusalem leaders to approve the conversion of Gentiles; it was quite another to redefine the basis of conversion by "faith" alone, thereby throwing out the law and the boundary markers that had defined what it meant to be the covenant people of God for centuries. These Jewish lobbyists insisted that faith in Jesus was not sufficient for salvation; they must be circumcised, supplementing the gospel with the law.

The challenge by this pressure group shot through the church like an earthquake, shaking the foundational pillars of their leadership. In Paul's letter to the Galatians (2:11–14) he explains how even Peter was intimidated by these men and withdrew from table fellowship with their Gentile brothers and sisters. Paul was infuriated and was not about to allow the status of these new converts be threatened. When Luke says there was "no small dissension and debate," it is his style of using deliberate understatement to emphasize the intensity of the conflict. In real terms this was a fiercely heated dispute with no neutral zones. With the battle lines clearly drawn, Paul and Barnabas

were appointed along with others to go up to Jerusalem to meet with the “apostles and elders” about the matter.

## II. The Freedom Train to Jerusalem

**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.” (vv. 3–5)**

I am struck by how Paul and Barnabas refused to be intimidated by their Jewish opponents and took every opportunity to spread the “good news” of God’s grace poured out upon Gentiles to the believers in Phoenicia and Samaria. This was Gentile territory and the news was received with resounding joy. Paul and Barnabas were determined to keep the joyous praise of this historic advance of the gospel playing all the way to Jerusalem. However, when they arrive and give their report, the Pharisees preempt any positive response by forcefully reiterating their complaint. “It is necessary to circumcise them and to order them to keep the law of Moses.”

## III. The Council Rules on Freedom

### A. Peter’s testimony

#### 1. Evidence

**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.” (vv. 6–9)**

In order to address the opposing views in the debate, I find it instructive that Peter, who is a trusted leader in the Jerusalem assembly, does not take on the role as a judge, but as a witness, giving priority to what God has done and how it radically changed his thinking. Luke Timothy Johnson’s translation gives a better overall sense of verse 7, “Brothers, you know that from early days among you God chose the Gentiles to hear the messages of the good news through my mouth and to believe.”<sup>2</sup> Peter recounts his experience regarding the conversion of Cornelius, the god-fearing Roman centurion. You may recall how difficult it was for God to enlist Peter in this historic advance of God’s kingdom. He had to pull out all the stops in his holy arsenal to orchestrate this meeting in Cornelius’ home.

After Peter’s long journey from the tanner’s house, he arrives at Cornelius’ home. When he sees a room filled with Gentiles, who are humbly waiting to hear him, he gives voice to his new insight:

**“You yourselves know how unlawful it is for a Jew to associate with or to visit anyone of another nation, but God has shown me that I should not call any person common or unclean... Truly I understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him” (Acts 10:28, 34–35).**

As Peter continued speaking, God, who knows the heart, “bore witness” to the Gentiles by giving them the Holy Spirit “just as he had to us.” The believers from among the circumcised party who had accompanied Peter were utterly amazed as they heard them praising God in different languages. Peter asked them “Can anyone withhold water for baptizing these people, who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?” (10:47). With no objections raised, Cornelius’ family and friends were baptized.

#### 2. Rebuke

**“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.” (vv. 10–11)**

Like a skilled attorney, Peter turns the plaintiff into the accused. “If God, who knows the heart, bears witness that they are clean, why do you provoke God by calling into question what he has done?” The law that the Pharisees are so eager to champion has been written on their hearts by the Spirit (2 Cor 3:3). Peter accuses them of “testing God” by refusing to recognize the work of the Spirit. This places their opposition in the same category as Ananias and Saphira, whose judgment turned out to be fatal.

### B. Paul and Barnabas’s testimony

**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. (v. 12)**

After Peter’s testimony, there was precious little anyone could say, so “all the assembly fell silent.” Though it was not the joyous response they had received on their journey to Jerusalem, at least it was an improvement, as no one was objecting. Paul and Barnabas then recounted all the signs and wonders God performed to authenticate the gospel they had preached as true, and the Gentiles who received it as bona fide members of God’s covenant people. After they spoke, James summed up the debate and gave his judgment on what they should do.

### C. James’ Ruling

#### 1. The justification from the prophets

**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.”  
(vv. 13–18)**

The James mentioned here is James, the brother of Jesus. During Jesus’ ministry he had not believed in him or followed him (John 7:5). But after the resurrection Jesus appeared to James (1 Cor 15:7) and he became a faithful follower of Jesus and a prominent leader in the Jerusalem church with a reputation for godliness and devotion. He also is most likely the author of the book bearing his name.

As the one who represented the Jewish Christian body in Jerusalem, he calls on the assembly to listen and offers an answer to the biblical objections. His summary—that “God visited the Gentiles, to take

from them a people for his name”—gives his full endorsement to Peter’s testimony. The language he uses is significant because it was normally used in the Old Testament of Israel as the people of God (Deut 26:18–19; 32:8–9; Ps 135:12). In Luke’s gospel the term “visit” (*episkeptomai*) was used of God’s miraculous intervention to send his Messiah to Israel (Luke 1:68, 78; 7:16; 19:44), and now it is applied to his miraculous “visitation” to call out a people for his name among the nations.

To substantiate his claim, James quotes the Greek version of Amos 9:11–12. The quotation is a powerful promise that when God restores David’s fallen tent and rebuilds its ruins, then a Gentile remnant will come flocking in to share the blessings that follow. Like the apostles, James had been taught by the Lord to interpret all prophecy through the lens of Christ (Luke 24:27). With new eyes he saw the restoration of David’s fallen tent fulfilled in the resurrection and exaltation of Christ, who was David’s seed. The rebuilding of the ruins was not a restoration of national Israel, but something new and greater on an unprecedented scale. God’s hope was not calling for more proselytes, but a brand new humanity, nothing short of a new creation. The remark that God had made these things known from of old reaches clear back to the promise God made to Abraham. This is a climactic moment in salvation history: when God’s promise to Abraham—“in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed” (Gen 12:3)—is fulfilled in Jesus the covenant family is thrown open to all without distinction. All are one by faith in Jesus Christ, whether Jew or Gentile, male or female, slave or free.

As Johnson observes,

Such narratives open up the possibility of perceiving God working in unexpected ways. They also open up the possibility of new understandings of Torah...In other words, it is the experience of God revealed through narrative which is given priority over this hermeneutical process: the text of Scripture doesn’t dictate how God should act. Rather, God’s action dictates how we should understand the text of Scripture.<sup>3</sup>

## 2. James’ ruling

“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.” (vv. 19–21)

Thus James, whom the circumcision party had claimed as their champion, rules against them in no uncertain terms. His judgment is that they “should not trouble those of the Gentiles who turn to God.” In other words, leave them alone and do not burden them by asking them to add anything to their faith, whether circumcision or the whole code of Jewish practices. They are full members of God’s family, so give them your full acceptance.

Having solved the doctrinal problem, there still remained a practical problem. Though the Gentile believers are set free from the law, they had to live alongside Jewish believers, who were brought up to observe various food laws. Therefore, without compromising their liberty, they needed to respect those consciences that might be offended by certain practices. At first sight, the list appears to be an odd mixture of moral and ceremonial matters, and scholars have spilled a lot of ink attempting to find coherence among them. The

simplest explanation seems to me to be that these were practices that went on in pagan temples. As Tom Wright suggests,

The Gentile Christians were to be encouraged not to offer needless slaps in the face to their as-yet-unbelieving Jewish neighbors. It would therefore be a great help if they would observe the most obvious point: to keep well away of pagan temples and everything that went on in them...Though the interpretation of the decree remains controversial, it seems most likely that what James had in mind was the actual performance of the various rituals involved in pagan worship, including the drinking of blood, ritual prostitution and other orgiastic elements that...were assumed to be practiced in at least some of pagan temples some of the time.<sup>4</sup>

John Stott concludes by saying,

The Jerusalem council secured a double victory—a victory of truth confirming the gospel of grace, and a victory of love in preserving the fellowship by sensitive concession to conscientious Jewish scruples. As Luther put it, “Paul was strong in faith, and soft in love.”<sup>5</sup>

## IV. The Declaration of Freedom

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.” (vv. 22–29)

After the ruling was given, all dissension and division dissipated, giving way to a supernatural spirit of peace that unified the whole church. Two leading representatives from Jerusalem were chosen to accompany Paul and Barnabas back to Antioch. Their task was to deliver a letter from Jerusalem’s leaders to all the Gentile believers in Antioch, Syria and Cilicia. The letter detailed their complete support of the Gentiles as bone fide members of the covenant people of God by faith alone in the Messiah and censored anyone who attempted to challenge their status. The letter emphasized not only the unity the decree had among God’s people, but also that “it seemed good to the Holy Spirit” as well. This is a claim that, if were not true, would have been taking the Lord’s name in vain. As Johnson points out, “It is not as though they were equal partners; rather the Church’s decision is one that has finally caught up with and therefore confirmed a decision made already by God.”<sup>6</sup>

## V. Rejoicing in Freedom

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. (30-35)

When they returned to Antioch and read the letter, the congregation was ecstatic. Following the reading, Judas and Silas used their prophetic gifts to further encourage and strengthen the faith of the brethren. After a period of time, Silas and Judas were sent back to Jerusalem “in peace,” and all that the term (*shalom*) implies. The church has survived a severe attack, remaining true to the gospel and preserving its unity as it advances with a new identity into new frontiers.

Perhaps nothing unites us as God’s people in the bonds of peace and deepens our joy as when the Holy Spirit opens our eyes to see the Father’s unrelenting passion for the world. Not in abstract theological terms, but with an actual invitation to be involved in what he’s doing, as he did with Peter, Paul and Barnabas.

Rather than viewing the current refugee crisis through the lens of fear, what if we asked God to open our eyes to what he is doing in the midst of it. What if God called some of us to leave our comfort zones and enter into their world to listen to their stories of survival? What if we discovered that God was on the move and doing a remarkable work among Muslims? The good news is that several among us have responded to God’s invitation and are helping the rest of us to see.

1. John Stott, *The Message of Acts*, BST (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1990), 30.
2. Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, SP5 (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1992), 258.
3. Johnson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 271.
4. N.T. Wright, *Acts for Everyone*, 46.
5. Stott, *The Message of Acts*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox 2008), 32
6. Johnson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 279.

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