

Acts 15:1–41

The Crisis in Antioch: Adding to the Gospel (Acts 15:1–2)

Some men came down from Judea to the church in Antioch and began teaching the believers, “Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved” (Acts 15:1). From the beginning, the church has had to deal with people who cannot leave the grace of God alone—people who insist on attaching extra requirements to salvation. They may claim to be defending holiness, but what they often produce is confusion, fear, and bondage.

Paul and Barnabas did not treat this as a minor disagreement. The text says there was “no small dissension and dispute” (Acts 15:2). In other words, they confronted the teaching directly. Why? Because this was not a discussion about preferences or traditions. This was a question about the Gospel itself: How is a sinner made right with God?

The church decided that Paul and Barnabas—and some others—should go up to Jerusalem to the apostles and elders to settle the issue (Acts 15:2). The stakes were too high to leave this unresolved.

Encouragement on the Road: Gentile Salvation Brings Joy (Acts 15:3–4)

As the church sent them on their way, they traveled through Phoenicia and Samaria, reporting the conversion of the Gentiles. The result was not suspicion or jealousy, but joy—“they caused great joy to all the brethren” (Acts 15:3). When God saves people, the church should celebrate—not interrogate.

When they arrived in Jerusalem, they were received by the church, the apostles, and the elders, and they reported all that God had done through them (Acts 15:4). Their report wasn’t about personalities or platforms—it was about the work of God.

The Dispute in Jerusalem: Faith Alone or Faith Plus? (Acts 15:5–11)

Some believers who had come from the sect of the Pharisees stood up and insisted, “It is necessary to circumcise them, and to command them to keep the law of Moses” (Acts 15:5). Notice: these were not outsiders. These were professing believers. Yet they were pushing a message that effectively turned salvation into faith plus law.

After much dispute, Peter stood up and reminded them of what God had already done. God had sent Peter to the Gentiles so they could hear the Gospel and believe. And God—who knows the heart—gave them the Holy Spirit just as He had given Him to the Jewish believers, “and made no distinction between us and them, purifying their hearts by faith” (Acts 15:8–9).

Then Peter asked a piercing question: “Why do you test God by putting a yoke on the neck of the disciples which neither our fathers nor we were able to bear?” (Acts 15:10). The law was holy, but it was never a ladder for sinners to climb into acceptance with God. Peter concluded with the heart of the Gospel: “*We believe that through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ we shall be saved in the same manner as they*” (Acts 15:11).

Salvation is not achieved by religious effort. It is received by grace through faith—because Jesus shed His blood on the cross to save us, and God raised Him from the dead, declaring that He is God, Savior, and Lord.

James Brings Clarity: Do Not Trouble the Gentiles (Acts 15:12–21)

The room grew quiet as Barnabas and Paul described the miracles and wonders God had done among the Gentiles (Acts 15:12). God Himself had testified to their salvation.

Then James—the recognized leader in the Jerusalem church—spoke. He affirmed Peter’s testimony and anchored the decision in the prophets, quoting, “After this I will return and will rebuild the tabernacle of David which has fallen down” (Acts 15:16). His point was simple: God is doing a real work among the Gentiles now, calling out a people for His name (Acts 15:14). That does not mean God has lost control of history or abandoned His purposes. “Known to God from eternity are all His works” (Acts 15:18). God is not surprised, not reactive, and not scrambling for a backup plan.

James then gave a wise, pastoral judgment: “We should not trouble those from among the Gentiles who are turning to God” (Acts 15:19). In other words: do not harass new believers with requirements God never gave.

At the same time, James proposed a short list of instructions so Jewish and Gentile believers could share life together without needless offense—abstaining from the pollutions of idols, from sexual immorality, from things strangled, and from blood (Acts 15:20). These were not conditions for salvation. They were practical steps for unity and holiness in a mixed fellowship.

The Letter: No Extra Burden, Only Necessary Guidance (Acts 15:22–35)

The apostles and elders, with the whole church, chose men to accompany Paul and Barnabas back to Antioch—Judas and Silas—so the church would not wonder whether the letter was genuine (Acts 15:22–27). The letter plainly stated that the troublemakers had no authorization: “To whom we gave no such commandment” (Acts 15:24).

Then came the heart of the message: “It seemed good to the Holy Spirit, and to us, to lay upon you no greater burden than these necessary things” (Acts 15:28). The church recognized that this was not merely human policy; it was Spirit-guided wisdom for a critical moment.

When the letter was read in Antioch, the believers rejoiced because of its encouragement (Acts 15:31). Judas and Silas, being prophets, exhorted and strengthened the brethren (Acts 15:32). Paul and Barnabas also remained in Antioch, teaching and preaching the word of the Lord, along with many others (Acts 15:35). What a healthy picture: doctrinal clarity, spiritual encouragement, and steady teaching.

A Painful Disagreement: Paul and Barnabas Separate (Acts 15:36–41)

After some time, Paul said to Barnabas, “Let us now go back and visit our brethren in every city where we have preached the word of the Lord, and see how they are doing” (Acts 15:36). Paul had a shepherd’s concern and a missionary drive. He wanted to strengthen what had been planted.

Barnabas wanted to take John Mark again (Acts 15:37). Paul did not think it wise because John Mark had abandoned the team on the first journey (Acts 15:38). The disagreement became sharp, and they separated. Barnabas took Mark to Cyprus, and Paul took Silas and went through Syria and Cilicia, strengthening the churches (Acts 15:39–41).

This passage is refreshingly honest. Even strong believers can disagree. But notice what did not happen: there is no record of slander, bitterness, or division in the church. The mission continued, and in time the breach healed. Later, Paul would speak of Mark as useful and valued (see Second Timothy 4:11). God was able to redeem what was painful and use it for further fruitfulness.

Practical Application

1. Guard the Gospel fiercely.
Anything that turns salvation into “Jesus plus” is a spiritual threat. The moment we add conditions to grace, we corrupt the message and burden people whom Christ came to free.
2. Refuse spiritual bullying.
Some people confuse control with holiness. They push rules, jargon, and pressure, and then call it “truth.” Acts 15 teaches the church to protect believers from that kind of troublemaking.
3. Value unity, but do not buy unity at the price of truth.
Paul and Barnabas fought for unity in the Gospel, but they did not compromise truth to keep the peace. There is a time to be gentle, and there is a time to say, “This is not what God has said.”
4. Distinguish salvation from sanctification.
We are saved by grace through faith because of what Jesus has done. After salvation, the Spirit teaches us to walk in holiness. Growth matters, but growth is not the basis of acceptance with God.
5. Handle disagreements in a Christlike way.
Even when separation happens, we should aim for humility, restraint, and future reconciliation. God can use imperfect moments without approving sinful attitudes.

A Challenge for Believers

Ask yourself honestly:

- Have I added expectations to the Gospel—spoken or unspoken—that make people feel they must earn God’s love?
- Have I judged someone’s salvation based on their background, maturity, or conformity to my preferences?
- Have I allowed anyone to trouble my soul with fear-based religion rather than the peace of Christ?

Stand again in the grace of God. If Jesus saved you by His blood, you do not maintain that salvation by anxiety, performance, or spiritual scorekeeping. Walk in holiness because you belong to Him, not to prove you deserve Him.

And if you are in conflict with another believer, ask the Lord for the courage to pursue peace without compromising truth—and for the humility to release pride, resentment, and control.

An Invitation to Non-Believers

Acts 15 is clear: you cannot save yourself by religious effort. Circumcision could not save. Law-keeping could not save. Rules cannot wash away guilt.

But Jesus can.

He shed His blood on the cross for your sins. God raised Him from the dead, declaring that He is God, Savior, and Lord. Salvation is not earned—it is received.

If you will turn to Him, you can be forgiven completely and made right with God. You can come to Him now and say:

*“God, I have sinned and I cannot save myself.
I believe that Jesus died for me and rose again.
Forgive my sins. Make me new.
Jesus, I trust You as my Savior and I surrender to You as my Lord.”*

If that is your heart, God is not looking for you to clean yourself up first. He is calling you to come—by faith—into His grace.