SMITH FOR CHRIST PUBLISHING · BEREAN DASHBOARD STUDY

Acts 15

Saved Through Grace, Just Like Them — O·I·A, integrated with the Deep Dive

OBSERVATION · INTERPRETATION · APPLICATION · 2026-11-10 · NASB 1995

"Seeking God diligently — examining the Scriptures daily to see whether these things were so." — Acts 17:11

CHAPTER THEME

A man is saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus — not grace plus circumcision, not grace plus my rule-keeping — and Jew and Gentile are saved the same way. That grace then teaches very different men to give up small freedoms for one another, and even when good men fall out, God keeps His work moving.

00 The Text

ACTS 15 (NASB95), MARKED

HOW THIS STUDY IS MARKED — God — His character & actions · Command / instruction · Key repeated word · Sin / warning · Promise / blessing · Time / place / contrast

1 Some men came down from Judea and began teaching the brethren,
"Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved."

2 And when Paul and Barnabas had great dissension and debate with them, the brethren determined that Paul and Barnabas and some others of them should go up to Jerusalem to the apostles and elders concerning this issue.

3 Therefore, being sent on their way by the church, they were passing through both Phoenicia and Samaria, describing in detail the conversion of the Gentiles, and were bringing great joy to all the brethren.

4 When they arrived at Jerusalem, they were received by the church and the apostles and the elders, and they reported all that God had done with them.

5 But some of the sect of the Pharisees who had believed stood up, saying, "It is necessary to circumcise them and to direct them to observe the Law of Moses."

6 The apostles and the elders came together to look into this matter.

7 After there had been much debate, Peter stood up and said to them, "Brethren, you know that in the early days God made a choice among you, that by my mouth the Gentiles would hear the word of the gospel and believe.

8 "And God, who knows the heart, testified to them giving them the Holy Spirit, just as He also did to us;

9 and He made no distinction between us and them, cleansing their hearts by faith.

10 "Now therefore why do you put God to the test by placing upon the neck of the disciples a yoke which neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear?

11 "But we believe that we are saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, in the same way as they also are."

12 All the people kept silent, and they were listening to Barnabas and Paul as they were relating what signs and wonders God had done through them among the Gentiles.

13 After they had stopped speaking, James answered, saying, "Brethren, listen to me.

14 “Simeon has related how God first concerned Himself about taking from among the Gentiles a people for His name.

15 “With this the words of the Prophets agree, just as it is written,

16 ‘AFTER THESE THINGS I will return, AND I WILL REBUILD THE TABERNACLE OF DAVID WHICH HAS FALLEN, AND I WILL REBUILD ITS RUINS, AND I WILL RESTORE IT,

17 SO THAT THE REST OF MANKIND MAY SEEK THE LORD, AND ALL THE GENTILES WHO ARE CALLED BY MY NAME,’

18 SAYS THE LORD, WHO MAKES THESE THINGS KNOWN FROM LONG AGO.

19 “Therefore it is my judgment that we do not trouble those who are turning to God from among the Gentiles,

20 but that we write to them that they abstain from things contaminated by idols and from fornication and from what is strangled and from blood.

21 “For Moses from ancient generations has in every city those who preach him, since he is read in the synagogues every Sabbath.”

22 Then it seemed good to the apostles and the elders, with the whole church, to choose men from among them to send to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas—Judas called Barsabbas, and Silas, leading men among the brethren,

23 and they sent this letter by them, “The apostles and the brethren who are elders, to the brethren in Antioch and Syria and Cilicia who are from the Gentiles, greetings.

24 “Since we have heard that some of our number to whom we gave no instruction have disturbed you with their words, unsettling your souls,

25 it seemed good to us, having become of one mind, to select men to send to you with our beloved Barnabas and Paul,

26 men who have risked their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.

27 “Therefore we have sent Judas and Silas, who themselves will also report the same things by word of mouth.

28 “For it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to lay upon you no greater burden than these essentials:

29 that you abstain from things sacrificed to idols and from blood and from things strangled and from fornication; if you keep yourselves free from such things, you will do well. Farewell.”

30 So when they were sent away, they went down to Antioch; and having gathered the congregation together, they delivered the letter.

31 When they had read it, they rejoiced because of its encouragement.

32 Judas and Silas, also being prophets themselves, encouraged and strengthened the brethren with a lengthy message.

33 After they had spent time there, they were sent away from the brethren in peace to those who had sent them out.

34 [But it seemed good to Silas to remain there.]

35 But Paul and Barnabas stayed in Antioch, teaching and preaching with many others also, the word of the Lord.

36 After some days Paul said to Barnabas, “Let us return and visit the brethren in every city in which we proclaimed the word of the Lord, and see how they are.”

37 Barnabas wanted to take John, called Mark, along with them also.

38 But Paul kept insisting that they should not take him along who had deserted them in Pamphylia and had not gone with them to the work.

39 And there occurred such a sharp disagreement that they separated from one another, and Barnabas took Mark with him and sailed away to Cyprus.

40 But Paul chose Silas and left, being committed by the brethren to the grace of the Lord.

41 And he was traveling through Syria and Cilicia, strengthening the churches.

Marked in the text

- **v1** "Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved" — Sin / warning
- **v2** "great dissension and debate" — Time / place / contrast
- **v3** "bringing great joy to all the brethren" — Promise / blessing
- **v4** "all that God had done with them" — God — His character & actions
- **v5** "It is necessary to circumcise them" — Sin / warning
- **v8** "God, who knows the heart" — God — His character & actions
- **v8** "giving them the Holy Spirit, just as He also did to us" — God — His character & actions
- **v9** "He made no distinction between us and them" — God — His character & actions
- **v9** "cleansing their hearts by faith" — Promise / blessing
- **v10** "a yoke which neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear" — Sin / warning
- **v11** "we are saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus" — Promise / blessing
- **v14** "taking from among the Gentiles a people for His name" — God — His character & actions
- **v16** "AFTER THESE THINGS" — Time / place / contrast
- **v16** "I WILL REBUILD THE TABERNACLE OF DAVID WHICH HAS FALLEN" — Promise / blessing
- **v17** "SO THAT THE REST OF MANKIND MAY SEEK THE LORD" — Promise / blessing
- **v19** "we do not trouble those who are turning to God from among the Gentiles" — Command / instruction
- **v20** "abstain from things contaminated by idols" — Command / instruction
- **v26** "men who have risked their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ" — Time / place / contrast
- **v28** "it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us" — God — His character & actions
- **v28** "no greater burden than these essentials" — Command / instruction
- **v31** "they rejoiced because of its encouragement" — Promise / blessing
- **v38** "who had deserted them in Pamphylia" — Sin / warning
- **v39** "such a sharp disagreement that they separated from one another" — Sin / warning
- **v40** "committed by the brethren to the grace of the Lord" — Promise / blessing
- **v41** "strengthening the churches" — Command / instruction
- **v1** "brethren" — Key repeated word (every occurrence)
- **v3** "Gentiles" — Key repeated word (every occurrence)
- **v22** "seemed good" — Key repeated word (every occurrence)

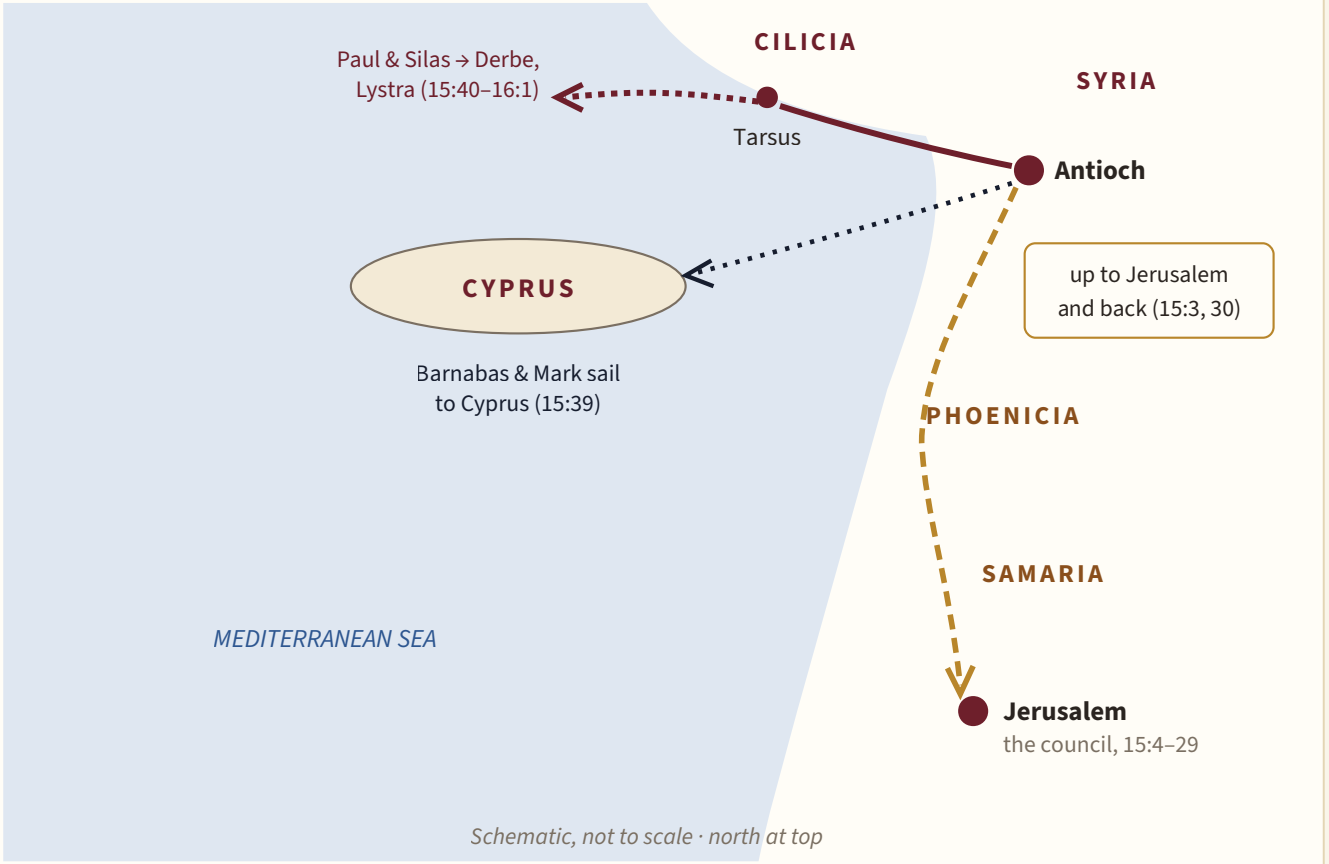
01 Observation

WHAT DOES THE TEXT SAY?

KEY VERSE · ACTS 15:1

"Some men came down from Judea and began teaching the brethren, "⚠Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.""

FIGURE · ANTIOCH, JERUSALEM AND THE PARTING



Follow the gold road down from Antioch through Phoenicia and Samaria to the council and back; then see the one team become two — Barnabas and Mark to Cyprus, Paul and Silas overland through Cilicia.

Setting. Antioch of Syria, after Paul and Barnabas's first missionary journey (14:26–28). Men from Judea teach that Gentile believers must be circumcised to be saved (v1). Paul and Barnabas are sent up to Jerusalem through Phoenicia and Samaria (vv2–3). The apostles and elders meet (vv4–29); a letter goes back to Antioch with Judas and Silas (vv22–35). Later Paul and Barnabas part: Barnabas and Mark sail to Cyprus, Paul and Silas go through Syria and Cilicia (vv36–41).

Structure:

- vv1–5 — **the question:** "Unless you are circumcised … you cannot be saved" (v1); great dissension and debate (v2); joy in Phoenicia and Samaria over the conversion of the Gentiles (v3); report in Jerusalem (v4); believing Pharisees: "It is necessary to circumcise them" (v5).
- vv6–11 — **Peter:** much debate (vv6–7); God chose Peter's mouth for the Gentiles (v7); God who knows the heart gave them the Spirit (v8); no distinction, hearts cleansed by faith (v9); why test God with a yoke? (v10); saved through grace, the same way (v11).
- vv12–21 — **Barnabas, Paul and James:** silence, and the report of signs and wonders (v12); "Brethren, listen to me" (v13); a people for His name from the Gentiles (v14); the Prophets agree — Amos 9 (vv15–18); "do not trouble" the Gentiles; four abstentions (vv19–20); Moses read every Sabbath (v21).
- vv22–35 — **the letter:** Judas and Silas chosen (v22); the letter: no instruction given to the troublers (vv23–24); one mind; men who risked their lives (vv25–27); "it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us" — no greater burden (vv28–29); joy at the encouragement; Judas and Silas strengthen the brethren (vv30–33); teaching in Antioch (vv34–35).
- vv36–41 — **the parting:** "Let us return and visit the brethren" (v36); Barnabas wants Mark, Paul refuses (vv37–38); a sharp disagreement, two teams (vv39–40); Paul strengthening the churches (v41).

Repeated words, with counts:

- "brethren" ×10 — vv1, 2, 3, 22, 23 (×2), 32, 33, 36, 40.
- "Paul" ×9 and "Barnabas" ×9 — vv2 (×2), 12, 22, 25, 35, 36, plus 38, 40 (Paul) and 37, 39 (Barnabas).
- "send / sent" ×8 — vv3, 22, 23, 25, 27, 30, 33 (×2).
- "God" ×7 — vv4, 7, 8, 10, 12, 14, 19.
- "Gentiles" ×6 — vv3, 7, 12, 14, 19, 23.
- "apostles" ×5 and "elders" ×5 — vv2, 4, 6, 22, 23.
- "Lord" ×5 — vv11, 26, 35, 36, 40; "Silas" ×5 — vv22, 27, 32, 34, 40.
- "seemed good" ×4 — vv22, 25, 28, 34; "church(es)" ×4 — vv3, 4, 22, 41; "Antioch" ×4 — vv22, 23, 30, 35.
- "dissension / debate / disagreement" ×4 — vv2 (×2), 7, 39.
- "encouragement / encouraged / strengthened / strengthening" ×4 — vv31, 32 (×2), 41.
- "word" ×4 — vv7, 27, 35, 36; "believe(d)" ×3 — vv5, 7, 11; "Moses" ×3 — vv1, 5, 21.
- "saved" ×2 — vv1, 11 (the question and the answer); "grace" ×2 — vv11, 40; "heart(s)" ×2 — vv8, 9; "Holy Spirit" ×2 — vv8, 28; "circumcised / circumcise" ×2 — vv1, 5.

Contrasts: "Unless you are circumcised … you cannot be saved" (v1) ⟷ "we are saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus" (v11). "It is necessary" (v5) ⟷ "these essentials" (v28). A yoke no one could bear (v10) ⟷ no greater burden (v28). Us ⟷ them — and "no distinction" (v9). Men "to whom we gave no instruction" (v24) ⟷ men "who have risked their lives" (v26). Great dissension (v2) ⟷ "of one mind" (v25) ⟷ a sharp disagreement (v39). One team (v35) ⟷ two teams (vv39–40).

Shape of the chapter: a problem in Antioch (1–5), a hearing in Jerusalem with three speakers (6–21), a letter carried back to Antioch (22–35), and a parting at Antioch (36–41). It begins and ends with a sharp argument — the first about the gospel, the second about a man.

Chapter theme (my words): God saves Jews and Gentiles the same way — through the grace of the Lord Jesus, by faith — and the church must not add a yoke He did not lay. Grace then asks the free to love the weak, and even the quarrels of good men cannot stop the word of the Lord.

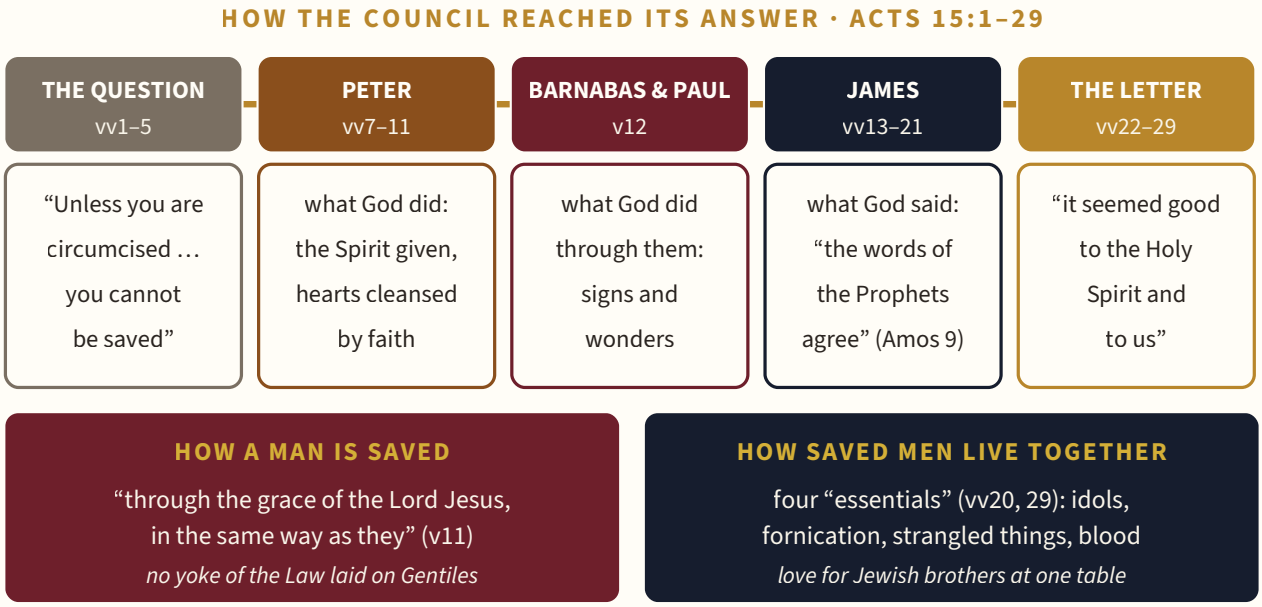
02 Interpretation

WHAT DOES THE TEXT MEAN?

KEY VERSE · ACTS 15:9

"and △ He made no distinction between us and them, ☆ cleansing their hearts by faith."

FIGURE · HOW THE COUNCIL DECIDED



Read left to right: a question, two reports of what God had done, and the Scripture that agrees with it — then notice the two separate answers, one about salvation and one about fellowship.

Was this really about salvation? Yes. Verse 1 states it plainly: "you cannot be saved." Guzik: "This was not a side issue; it had to do with salvation itself." Sproul's sermon on these verses, as Ligonier summarizes it, treats the Judaizers as the first of many who would "add or take away from the truth that we are justified by faith alone in Christ alone." Henry calls it enforcing "their own inventions under pain of damnation."

What did Peter mean by "in the same way as they" (v11)? A Jew would expect to say Gentiles are saved like Jews. Peter says the opposite — we Jews are saved the way the Gentiles are, by grace (Guzik, with Boice). Henry: "There is not one way of salvation for the Jews and another for the Gentiles." Spurgeon: "Faith alone did it."

What is the "yoke" (v10)? The Law of Moses taken as the condition of acceptance with God. Peter says Israel never carried it (Guzik; Henry: "a heavy yoke"). This is not contempt for the Law — Moses is still read every Sabbath (v21) — but a refusal to make it the ladder to God (Galatians 5:1).

How should I read James's use of Amos (vv16–18)? Guzik and Henry read the rebuilt "tabernacle of David" as the church of Jew and Gentile; Henry: "The church of Christ may be called the tabernacle of David." I read it a little

differently, and I want to be fair about that. James says the prophets "agree" with Gentile salvation (v15) — he does not say Amos is finished. "After these things I will return" fits the order Paul gives in Romans 11:25–26: first the Gentiles are gathered as "a people for His name" (v14), then the Lord restores David's house for Israel. Either way, all agree on James's point: Gentiles coming to God as Gentiles is what the prophets expected.

Why the four abstentions (v20, 29)? Not to earn salvation — that was already settled in v11. Guzik and Stott tie them to the laws for foreigners living among Israel (Leviticus 17–18): idols, sexual immorality, strangled meat and blood. They let Jewish and Gentile believers eat together. Guzik calls it "The Law of Love." Henry: "meet them halfway." Fornication is not just a cultural courtesy; it is sin everywhere in the New Testament (1 Thessalonians 4:3).

What does "it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us" mean (v28)? The church prayed, listened to what God had done, tested it by Scripture and came to "one mind" (v25). Guzik, with Pierson, notes the Spirit treated as a fellow-counselor. The Spirit is named first.

Who was right, Paul or Barnabas? Luke does not say (Guzik). Guzik: "probably both" had to make it right. Henry: "a fault on both sides" — kinship moved Barnabas; "perhaps Paul was too severe." The rest of the New Testament shows reconciliation: Mark is with Paul in Colossians 4:10 and "useful" in 2 Timothy 4:11.

Word study (Greek):

- **dissension — *stasis* (G4714):** a standing apart, commotion; with *zētēsis* (G2214), debate (v2).
- **conversion — *epistrophē* (G1995):** a turning around; only here in the NT (v3).
- **cleansing — *katharizō* (G2511):** to purify (v9; cf. 10:15).
- **yoke — *zygos* (G2218):** the Law's bar (v10); Christ's (Matt 11:30); slavery (Gal 5:1).
- **grace — *charis* (G5485); saved — *sōzō* (G4982):** v11.
- **concerned Himself — *episkeptomai* (G1980):** to visit (v14; Luke 1:68); **people — *laos* (G2992).**
- **tabernacle — *skēnē* (G4633):** David's fallen booth (v16; Amos 9:11).
- **it seemed good — *dokeō* (G1380):** vv22, 25, 28.
- **burden — *baros* (G922); essentials — *epanankes* (G1876):** v28.
- **encouragement — *paraklēsis* (G3874):** v31.
- **deserted — *aphistēmi* (G868):** withdrew (v38).
- **sharp disagreement — *paroxysmos* (G3948):** v39; Heb 10:24.
- **strengthening — *epistērizō* (G1991):** vv32, 41; 14:22; 18:23.

Key insights to carry (from the Deep Dive):

1. **Some questions are worth a fight** — salvation itself (Guzik).
2. **Saved Pharisees can still think like Pharisees** (v5; Henry).
3. **God has already shown His hand** — the Spirit given, no distinction (vv8–9).
4. **Jews are saved like Gentiles** (v11).
5. **The question is whose yoke** — the Law's, or Christ's (v10).
6. **Faith cleans the heart** — it changes what I love (Spurgeon).
7. **Experience must be tested by Scripture** (v15).
8. **Necessary is smaller than we think** — essentials for fellowship, not salvation (v28).
9. **Good men can disagree badly** — a fault on both sides (Henry).

10. **A quitter can become useful** — Mark (2 Tim 4:11).

Cross-references: Gen 17:9–14; Lev 17:10–14; 18:6–30; Amos 9:11–12; Matt 11:28–30; Luke 1:68; Acts 10:15, 44–48; 11:1–18; 12:25; 13:13; 14:22, 26–28; Rom 3:28–30; 10:12; 11:25–26; 1 Cor 8:9; Gal 2:1–16; 3:28; 5:1; Eph 2:8–9; Col 4:10; 1 Thess 4:3; 2 Tim 4:11; Heb 10:24.

03 Application

HOW DOES IT CHANGE ME?

KEY VERSE · ACTS 15:19

"Therefore it is my judgment that we do not trouble those who are turning to God from among the Gentiles,"

FIGURE · JOHN MARK'S STORY

JOHN MARK: FROM "DESERTED" TO "USEFUL"

Acts 12:25	Acts 13:13	Acts 15:37–39	Colossians 4:10	2 Timothy 4:11
Barnabas and Saul take Mark along	Mark leaves them returns to Jerusalem	sharp disagreement; Barnabas takes Mark	Mark is with Paul, "cousin of Barnabas"	"he is useful to me for service"

Luke does not say who was right (Guzik) · "a fault on both sides" (Henry)

Two teams went out instead of one — Barnabas to Cyprus, Paul and Silas overland — *and the young man who quit became, years later, a man Paul asked for by name.*

The quarrel of 15:39 is not the end of Mark's story; follow him forward to Paul's last letter, where the man who deserted is "useful."

Truth to hold — saved through grace, nothing added. I have watched men in recovery and in the facility try to earn their way back to God: ninety days clean, a better record, more chapel. Those are good things, but they are not the price of salvation. Peter says we are saved "through the grace of the Lord Jesus" (v11), the same way as anyone else. This week I will stop adding to Jesus in my own head, and I will tell one man plainly that God already accepts those who trust His Son.

Sin to confess — laying yokes on other men. I have been the man "from Judea" (v1). I have made my own habits — how I pray, what I don't do, how long I've been clean — into a test for whether another man is really saved. Peter calls that putting God to the test (v10). I confess it, and I will look for the brother I have been measuring and treat him as one whose heart God cleansed by faith (v9).

Command to obey — give up a freedom for a brother. The Gentiles kept their freedom from the Law, and still gave up some things for the sake of Jewish brothers (vv20, 29). There are freedoms I can lay down for a weaker brother — what I drink around a man fighting alcohol, what I joke about, what I watch with others (1 Cor 8:9). Love asks for that.

Example to follow — the council. They argued hard, listened in silence (v12), tested what God had done by what God had said (v15), and came to one mind (v25). When our group hits a hard question, I want us to do the same: tell what God has done, open the Book, pray, and wait for what seems good to the Holy Spirit.

Example to weigh — Paul, Barnabas and Mark. Two good men fell out over a young man who had quit. I have written men off like Paul did, and I have defended men out of loyalty like Barnabas. Mark became "useful" in the end (2 Tim 4:11). I will reach out this week to one man I gave up on, and to one man I fell out with.

Questions for the table (from the Deep Dive):

1. What do I add to Jesus — a habit, a rule, a performance — and quietly treat as necessary for being right with God? (15:1, 5; Gal 2:16) *Unless you are circumcised … you cannot be saved.*
2. Peter said God "made no distinction between us and them." Whom do I treat as a second-class believer because of his past or his background? (15:8–9; Rom 10:12) *God, who knows the heart, gave them the Spirit too.*
3. Where am I still carrying a yoke "which neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear"? What would it mean to put it down and take Christ's? (15:10–11; Gal 5:1; Matt 11:29–30) *We refuse to be entangled again with the yoke of bondage (Spurgeon).*
4. The council tested experience by Scripture. When I make a big decision, how do I make sure the Word, not just my feelings, has the last say? (15:12–18) *With this the words of the Prophets agree.*
5. The Gentiles gave up some freedoms for the sake of Jewish brothers. What liberty might I need to lay down so that a weaker brother is not tripped up? (15:20, 28–29; 1 Cor 8:9) *Church-rulers should impose only necessary things (Henry).*
6. Is there a Paul–Barnabas split in my life — a broken partnership or a man I wrote off like Mark? What step toward peace can I take? (15:37–39; 2 Tim 4:11) *He is useful to me for service.*

Worship. The Lord Jesus saves by grace, the same way, for every man who believes. God knows the heart, gives His Spirit without favoritism, and cleanses hearts by faith. He made His plans known from long ago, He is gathering a people for His name from every nation, and He has not forgotten the fallen house of David.

Prayer. Lord Jesus, thank You that I am saved through Your grace and nothing I add. Forgive me for the yokes I have laid on other men and the ones I still try to carry myself. Cleanse my heart by faith, make me willing to give up my freedoms for a weaker brother, and give our group one mind under Your Word. Heal the splits I have caused, and make the men I gave up on useful for Your service. Amen.

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