



Study Guide: Acts – Chapter 15

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This study guide provides an educational overview of Acts Chapter 15 using a verse-by-verse structure, theological context, and application-oriented insights grounded in Scripture.

Introduction

Acts Chapter 15 serves as a pivotal moment in the early church's development, addressing a critical controversy about the requirements for Gentile believers. This chapter contributes to the book's flow by showcasing the church's struggle to define the relationship between Jewish law and the new covenant in Christ. Readers should watch for how the apostles and elders navigate theological disagreement, the role of the Holy Spirit in guiding decisions, and the establishment of principles that shape Christian identity beyond cultural boundaries.

Context

The immediate literary context of Acts 15 follows the expansion of the gospel to Gentiles, particularly through the ministry of Paul and Barnabas. The chapter is set against the backdrop of the early church grappling with the question of whether Gentile converts must observe the Mosaic Law, specifically circumcision. Key speakers include the apostles Peter, Paul, Barnabas, and James, the leader of the Jerusalem church. The setting is the Jerusalem Council, a formal gathering to resolve doctrinal disputes. Historically, this moment reflects the covenantal tension between the old covenant of the Law and the new covenant inaugurated by Jesus Christ, highlighting the transition from ethnic Israel to a multiethnic church.

Outline

The chapter begins with the arrival of certain men from Judea who insist that Gentile believers must be circumcised according to the Law of Moses. This sparks a debate among the apostles and elders in Jerusalem. The council then hears testimonies from Peter, who recounts his experience with the Gentiles and the work of the Holy Spirit, and Paul and Barnabas, who share their missionary journeys. James delivers a judgment that affirms Gentile inclusion without the full yoke of the Law, recommending only a few necessary



abstentions. The decision is communicated through a letter sent with Paul, Barnabas, and others to the Gentile churches. The chapter concludes with the positive reception of this letter and the continued strengthening of the churches.

Verse-by-Verse Study

Verses 1–3: Certain individuals from Judea arrive in Antioch teaching that Gentile believers must be circumcised to be saved. This sparks a significant dispute, prompting the church in Antioch to send Paul and Barnabas to Jerusalem for clarification. This highlights early doctrinal tensions about law and grace.

Verses 4–6: The church in Jerusalem gathers the apostles and elders to consider the matter. This formal assembly underscores the seriousness of the controversy and the communal nature of decision-making in the early church.

Verses 7–11: Peter addresses the assembly, reminding them of his experience with Gentiles and how God gave the Holy Spirit to them just as He did to Jewish believers. He emphasizes that salvation is through the grace of the Lord Jesus, not by the Law, challenging the necessity of circumcision.

Verses 12–21: Paul and Barnabas recount the miracles and signs God performed among the Gentiles through their ministry. James then offers a judgment, referencing Scripture to support the inclusion of Gentiles without full adherence to the Law, suggesting only a few essential requirements to maintain fellowship and avoid offense.

Verses 22–29: The council's decision is written into a letter sent with Paul, Barnabas, Judas, and Silas to the Gentile believers in Antioch, Syria, and Cilicia. The letter clarifies the requirements and encourages the churches, demonstrating the early church's effort to maintain unity and doctrinal clarity.

Verses 30–35: Upon receiving the letter, the Gentile churches rejoice at the encouragement and the relief from the burden of the Law. Judas and Silas, who are prophets, strengthen the believers through teaching, illustrating the ongoing work of the Spirit in the churches.

Verses 36–41: Paul and Barnabas plan to revisit the churches to strengthen them, but a sharp disagreement arises over John Mark's participation. This leads to their separation, with Barnabas taking Mark and Paul choosing Silas. This division marks the beginning of separate missionary journeys, showing the human element in ministry and the spread of



the gospel.

Key Themes

One key theme is the unity of the church amid diversity, demonstrated by the Jerusalem Council's effort to resolve conflict through dialogue and Scripture. Another theme is the role of the Holy Spirit as the guiding force in decision-making, affirming that God's work transcends human traditions. The chapter also highlights the tension between law and grace, emphasizing salvation by faith in Jesus Christ rather than adherence to the Mosaic Law. Additionally, the theme of mission and inclusion emerges, as Gentiles are welcomed fully into the community of believers without unnecessary burdens.

Cross-References

Galatians 2:1–10 parallels the Jerusalem Council, providing Paul's perspective on the same issue of Gentile inclusion and the law. This passage clarifies Paul's defense of justification by faith and the recognition of his mission to the Gentiles. Romans 11 discusses the relationship between Israel and Gentiles, helping to understand the theological foundation for the church's expansion. Matthew 28:19–20, the Great Commission, undergirds the missionary impetus seen in Acts 15. Finally, 1 Corinthians 12 highlights the unity and diversity of the body of Christ, echoing the themes of inclusion and mutual respect evident in the council's decision.

Application

Modern disciples can learn from Acts 15 the importance of addressing doctrinal disputes with humility, openness, and reliance on the Holy Spirit. The chapter encourages believers to prioritize unity over legalism and cultural barriers, fostering an inclusive community grounded in grace. It challenges the tendency to impose unnecessary requirements on others and invites reflection on how the gospel transcends cultural and religious traditions. Additionally, the example of Paul and Barnabas's disagreement reminds us that conflict is natural but can be navigated in ways that continue to advance the mission. The chapter calls the church today to balance truth and love in its witness and practice.

Summary

Acts 15 narrates the Jerusalem Council's resolution of the controversy over Gentile believers and the Mosaic Law, marking a defining moment in the early church's identity and mission. Through careful deliberation, testimony, and reliance on the Holy Spirit, the



apostles and elders affirm salvation by grace and establish guidelines that promote unity without legalistic burdens. The chapter concludes with the strengthening of the churches and the beginning of new missionary journeys, illustrating both divine guidance and human dynamics in the spread of the gospel. This chapter underscores the church's call to embrace diversity, uphold grace, and pursue unity in advancing God's kingdom.