**ACTS**

The Council at Jerusalem in chapter 15 functions as the center of the book. The transition from Jerusalem and ministry to the nation of Israel toward the Gentiles is underway. However, this shift has stirred up controversy, which much be dealt with if unity is to be maintained among the churches.

Additionally, chapter 15 functions as a shift from Peter’s ministry to Paul’s — from an Israel-focused ministry, to a global ministry.

The text can be divided into the following blocks:

DAY 1 - vv. 1-6 - The Controversy Begun

DAY 2 - vv. 7-12 - Much Debate

DAY 3 - vv 13-21 - The Decision

DAY 4 - vv. 23-29 - The Letter

DAY 5 - vv. 30-35 - The Aftermath

Luke’s primary purpose is to show that all the leaders of the church (Paul and his cohort, Peter, and James) are in agreement, and that the descension regarding the keeping of the Law of Moses was ended, regardless of what other Judaizing elements of the church might suggest.

DAY 1 - vv. 1-6 - The Controversy Begun

According to v. 1, the situation in Antioch, which to this point has seemed rather rosy, is in danger. Some men come from the church in Judea and begin to teach a false doctrine. They are claiming that without circumcision, Gentiles cannot be saved. The inclusion of legal requirements is a false Gospel, and Paul and his team would have none of it.

The cause of these men coming is not clear. Likely, there was a substantial amount of interaction between the churches in Antioch and Jerusalem — both were ‘ground zero’ for the evangelization of their respective groups. This makes sense in the context of Paul’s meeting with the leaders in Jerusalem recorded in Gal 2:1-10. The focus of Paul on the Gentiles and Peter and James on the Jews would have been a mutually agreed arrangement.

However, there would have been interchange between them (see for example, 11:27; 13:1) so that the arrival of these men would have been somewhat commonplace. Their teaching was anything but.

Many scholars believe this is the same group that cause Peter and Barnabas to stumble in who they are eating with in Gal 2:11-14, and is likely what forced the need for the Jerusalem council.

We cannot be certain when the next incident mentioned by Paul in Galatians 2:11–14 took place, though it is most likely to have been before the resolutions of the Jerusalem Council brought public agreement between Peter, James, Paul, and Barnabas on such matters. Paul accused Peter, Barnabas, and the other Jewish Christians of ‘not acting in line with the truth of the gospel’ (Gal. 2:14), because they withdrew from eating with Gentile believers after ‘certain people came from James’ (2:12).[[1]](#footnote-2)

It appears, then, based on this chronology, that the only one of the apostles who had not begun to acquiesce in some sense was Paul himself. His rebuke of Peter and Barnabas, and his clear teaching in Jerusalem to James likely saved the church at this juncture.

If these men are from James, however, he seems to indicate that they went beyond what they should have (see 15:24) in their teaching, which may indicate the James was not deceived. Regardless, though, the men cause some controversy in the church, and seem to do so with authority they do not possess.

However, before we stand in judgment, we should be careful. The need for Mosaic practices would have been quite difficult for the Jews to part with, and Jewish believers would have likely found it challenging to mingle with their new Gentile brothers. The need for love and clarity was never greater!

According to v. 2, Paul and Barnabas vigorously oppose these teachers. That Barnabas is mentioned here as opposing them means that he likely saw the wisdom of Paul’s rebuke, and began to oppose the false teachers. The debate cannot be resolved locally, and so the brothers send Paul and Barnabas up to Jerusalem to hash it out with the other elders there and the apostles.

It was not enough to indulge in dissension and questioning at Antioch: the whole issue had to be debated and decided at the highest level. Otherwise, there was grave danger of a complete cleavage between the churches of Jerusalem and Judaea on the one hand and the church of Antioch and her daughter-churches on the other. The church of Antioch therefore sent Paul, Barnabas, and a number of other responsible members to discuss the question with the leaders of the church of Jerusalem.[[2]](#footnote-3)

Luke records the travels of the dynamic duo in v. 3 down to Jerusalem in order to make it clear that the churches in Phoenicia and Samaria were universally encouraged by the conversion of the Gentiles.[[3]](#footnote-4)

The beautiful contrast between the dissension over doctrine and the joy among the disciples should be stark—Paul and Barnabas are happily pointing these people to the beauty of conversions while at the same time gearing up for a serious meeting.

V. 4 presents the third time Paul and Barnabas share about what God did through them among the Gentiles in Asia Minor. Again, the focus is on God’s work among the Gentiles and the miraculous conversions that were taking place.

The language is important—the missionaries were received by the ‘church’ (the congregation at large), the ‘apostles’ (likely the twelve, who had either remained in the city or had returned for this discussion) and the ‘elders’ (the leaders of the congregation in Jerusalem, which would have included James, the brother of Jesus.)

According to v. 5, however, there were some in the church who struggled with Paul’s report. Luke notably names them as Pharisees. This should be no surprise. Paul himself was a former Pharisee, and relied on the Law for righteousness. Nevertheless, these men ‘stood up’—an indication that in the middle of the rejoicing over the blessings of Gentile conversion, they interrupt with their issue.

The language of their suggestion is strong. They say that it is ‘necessary’ (obligatory) that the Gentiles be circumcised and then ‘directed’ (παραγγέλλω - *commanded*) to ‘observe’ (τηρέω - *keep*) the Law of Moses. These guys aren’t messing around. They want the Gentiles to effectively become proselytes, with little or no distinction from the OT form of conversion.[[4]](#footnote-5)

Paul’s own experience of relying on Christ rather than the Law would have been in the forefront of his mind, and would likely have pressed on him in this moment (see Phil 3:4-11). However, we do not hear from him at this point directly.

In v. 6, we see that the leaders gather to look into the matter and make a final decision. Some have used this passage to argue for a larger hierarchy of churches (Presbyterians, Anglicans, Catholics, etc.). However, this is not the case here. Rather than speaking legally or authoritatively, v. 22 would indicate that they come to a mutual agreement before sending the letter with instruction.

Ultimately, it seems clear that the church gathers ‘at large’ during it’s infancy to come to a universal understanding of what God has done with the conversion of the Gentiles. This makes the meeting far more like an ecumenical council than a meeting of a session of the presbytery.

Day One Questions:

1. While it’s easy to condemn these Judiazers, are there things in your spiritual life that aren’t biblical mandates, but might be hard to part from (conscience issues, personal habits, etc.) if you were placed in a different context?
2. When you’re coming into a hard conversation, what might help you to maintain joy like Paul and Barnabas do here?
3. How might we be tempted to include works of the ‘law’ in our justification?

DAY 2 - vv. 7-12 - Much Debate

The issue is a tricky one, and there is apparently substantial debate regarding how to best approach the new Gentile converts. The section is divided into three distinct speeches. The first is from Peter, then from Paul and Barnabas, and finally James (covered in day three).

In v. 7, the language of ‘much debate’ (same word as in v. 2) would indicate that the participants in the discussion were more than just the four people mentioned.

Peter’s statement begins with him standing, which would indicate the the theological discussion was ongoing, but Peter decides to speak from his experience. The conversion of Cornelius probably took place sometime around 40 AD, and the Council of Jerusalem took place in 49 or 50 AD. So Peter’s statement that in the early days God chose him makes sense.

Peter doesn’t take personal credit, of course, but says that God chose him as the vehicle by which the Gentiles would hear the Gospel. Peter also includes that they would believe—an obvious indicator of the moment when Cornelius came to faith.

God demonstrated his will by deliberately choosing that the Gentiles would hear the gospel and believe through Peter’s preaching and thus be saved (10:34–43). Peter claims to have a special right to be heard in this debate, and Luke’s narrative has shown us why. Even though others were pioneers in evangelising Gentiles (cf. 8:26–40; 11:19–20), Peter had a unique role in receiving the vision about God’s will and witnessing the outpouring of God’s Spirit in a way that paralleled Pentecost. When he was called to account for entering the house of the uncircumcised and eating with them (11:2–3), he offered a personal recollection of the Cornelius incident (11:4–16), with a brief theological conclusion (11:17)[[5]](#footnote-6)

In v. 8-9, Peter makes it clear that, in God’s sovereignty, He clearly proves that the conversion of those saints was of the Lord, and without circumcision or Law-keeping. His argument is actually profoundly succinct and powerful. There are a number of noteworthy phrases.

First, Peter tells them that God knows the heart. They can debate what must be done to be saved, but God knows who is really saved. His affirmation is all that really matters.

Second, Peter makes it clear that God testified to the fact of their salvation. If the only evaluation that matters is God’s, then God’s testimony is unequivocal.

Third, the means by which God testified to their salvation is by giving them the Holy Spirit. The presence of the Spirit in power with Cornelius leaves zero room for debate about his salvation.

Fourth, Peter explains that God made no distinction between Jew and Gentile. The lack of distinction is with the sending of the Spirit. The Jews had received the Spirit with power at Pentecost. Cornelius had received the same Spirit, without any distinction, and without any legal requirements.

Fifth, Peter explains that the Gentiles received the same blessing of a cleansed heart by faith. Just as the Jews had received forgiveness, the Gentiles had as well.

The obvious conclusion from Peter’s speech is that the Gentiles were saved entirely apart from the works of the Law, just as the Jews had been. His conclusion follows. It is noteworthy that Peter’s speech includes specific elements of Paul’s own testimony of his salvation in Gal 2:15-21, which likely were said aloud to Peter when Peter was tempted to withdraw from fellowship with the Gentiles in Antioch.

In v. 10, having made it clear that there is no distinction in God’s mind, turns to the obvious question. Why would they test God by adding to what He has already done? This question is laced with potential judgment. Putting God to the test in the OT was always met with condemnation (see Ex. 17:2; Dt. 6:16; Ps. 95:9), and Peter used the same words with Ananias and Saphira regarding the work of the Spirit (Acts 5:9). Clearly this is a major issue for Peter.

He proceeds to describe the Law’s requirements as a yoke that neither they nor their fathers could bear. The yoke was the means of attaching an animal to a burden to be pulled. The Law was burdensome if one used it for salvation (not burdensome for those who are saved, however). Since these men were seeking to place the Law and circumcision as a means of salvation, they were seeking to place that yoke on the Gentiles.

“The yoke which some were now proposing to place on the necks of Gentile Christians was one which they themselves and their forefathers had found too heavy. The term “yoke” is particularly appropriate in this context: a proselyte, by undertaking to keep the law of Moses, was said to “take up the yoke of the kingdom of heaven.”[[6]](#footnote-7)

Peter’s humble assessment of all of Jewish history is right—they never obeyed the Law (bore the yoke) as they ought. God always required more of them than they could give, and they always needed a Savior by faith, just as the Gentiles.

Viewing the way of salvation through faith in Christ as the ultimate expression of God’s will for his people, Peter spoke quite frankly about the yoke of the law as an obligation his fellow Jews had never really managed to fulfill—‘a yoke which they had not had the strength to carry’. Since God did not require Gentiles who trusted in Jesus to live that way, Peter found it objectionable that some of his fellow Jews wanted to place such a burden on Gentile converts.[[7]](#footnote-8)

In v. 11, Peter makes this point painfully clear. He says that they all understand that their salvation was through the grace of God in Christ, and that of course Gentile salvation was the same.

The need for salvation implies that people are sinners. Since the first person plural verb translated as “we believe” (πιστεύομεν) refers to Jewish believers in Jesus, Peter implies by this statement that the provisions of the Mosaic law through which Israelites and Jews could receive atonement and forgiveness of their sins are no longer in force; rather, salvation is through divine grace by the work of Jesus, not through being Jewish (circumcision) and obeying the Mosaic law. This is true for Jews as it is for Gentiles (καθʼ ὃν τρόπον κἀκεῖνοι). Peter fundamentally agrees with Paul (as v. 12 implies): salvation comes not from circumcision and obedience to the law but is granted by God on account of the sinners’ faith in Jesus, Israel’s Messiah and Savior (cf. Gal 2:15–16).[[8]](#footnote-9)

The argument at this point should be over. Peter has made it clear that the work of God in salvation is clearly by grace alone, and that the Gentiles, like the Jews, had received that grace entirely apart from any work of the Law.

Luke seems to make the point in v. 12, when he says that all the people kept silent. For all intents and purposes, Peter had finished the debate with his speech.

Instead, they were listening to the second speakers in these events—Paul and Barnabas—who were relating the signs and wonders that God had done through them in the Gentile churches. This is now the third time they’ve shared the works that God had done (14:27; v. 4).

Luke’s inclusion here of the signs and wonders is directive. He wants to make it clear that the work that the missionaries had done among the Gentiles was confirmed by God as being approved, even thought they didn’t teach Law-keeping to the new converts.

God granted signs and wonders “among the Gentiles” (ἐν τοῖς ἔθνεσιν), which means that God authenticated the Gentile mission of Barnabas and Paul, who did not require Gentile believers in Jesus to be circumcised and become Jewish proselytes. The fact that God expressed his approval of the Gentile mission of the two apostles constitutes at the same time a validation of what Peter had said, namely, that Gentile believers in Jesus should not be circumcised and be made to submit to the Mosaic law in all its details.[[9]](#footnote-10)

Day Two Questions:

1. Why is it important that the leaders were gathered together to make this final evaluation of this point? How does this relate to Luke’s overarching argument for Theophilus?
2. What encouraging things do we learn about Peter when we consider his failures in Antioch (Gal 2:11-14) and his present speech? How might this apply to us?
3. As you think through the five points of Peter’s argument, which might make you stumble most?

DAY THREE - vv 13-21 - The Decision

The next section deals with James’ final decision in the council. It would be erroneous to think that James has the final say. Instead, James simply summarizes what the council has already effectively concluded.

Luke makes it plain that the debate is ended when he says that they had stopped speaking. And in v. 13, he begins by calling the whole gathering brothers, and then calling them to listen to him. As the leader of the church there in Jerusalem, the task to finalize the debate likely fell to him.

It was James the brother of Jesus. Paul also mentioned James’s role at the Jerusalem Conference (Gal 2:9; cf. 1:19) and called him one of the “pillars” of the church, along with Peter and John. James had evidently become the leading elder of the Jerusalem congregation. His leadership of the church has already been indicated in 12:17. Upon Paul’s final visit to Jerusalem he appears to have been the sole leader of the congregation, and the apostles no longer seem to have been present in the city (21:18–25).[[10]](#footnote-11)

The first point James makes in v. 14 is that Peter has already effectively ended the debate by recalling what happened with Cornelius. He calls Peter ‘Simeon’, which is a hellenized version of Simon, Peter’s Jewish name. James likely is using Jewish language to help his listeners and remind them that Peter is a good Jew, and yet is making this claim.

James’ language is very striking. The people (*laos*) are taken from among the nations (*ethne*). These two words are explicitly used by Moses in Deut 14:2 in reference to Israel - “…the Lord has chosen you to be a people (*laos*) for His own possession out of all the peoples (*ethne*) who are on the face of the earth.”

While God called Israel *out* from the nations, this new group will be brought *from* the nations. In James’ explanation, God’s election of Israel is on par with this new work in the election of His people in the church (for an OT reference to this event, see Zech 2:11). This does not mean that God is done with Israel, but that God’s plan in history has shifted during this church age.

James now turns to the prophets to prove his point in vv. 15-18. He quotes from Amos 9:11-12 as proof of God’s purposes among the Gentiles. At first glance, the quotation appears to equate Israel with the new people of God among the church. However, this does not give a complete explanation.

A comparison of Amos 9:11-12 and this passage indicate a few changes, which will be discussed below. However, we can consider each portion independently.

First, the four ‘I will’ statements are evident, with the first phrase (I will return) being likely an inclusion from a text with similar context in Jeremiah 12:15-16. In that passage, the Lord says that He will return and restore the nation to Himself. In that passage, the inclusion of Gentiles among God’s people Israel is a notable addition. It is best to think of the phrase as being added by James here with the understanding that these passages work together to give a fuller description of the events that the apostles are witnessing.

The next three ‘I will’ statements all address the ‘tabernacle of David’. This could refer the temple itself, since the word ‘tabernacle’ could be used in that sense. However, this is a challenging interpretation, since David was not allowed to build the temple, and even in the days when James quotes the verse, the temple had not been destroyed. Instead, the word could mean tent, or dwelling place, which would give more information to the original text, and would therefore mean the ‘house’ of David.

The house of David refers to his kingly line, which had certainly fallen into disrepair. The kingship had ended with the captivity Judah, and there was not ruler in Israel.

The three phrases are in parallel. The Lord would ‘rebuild’ what ‘had fallen’. He would ‘rebuild its ruins’ and would ‘restore it’. These phrases follow the LXX text of the quotation almost exactly, though the Hebrew text has slight variations.

The point of the passage is that the Lord would cause the house of David to be restored—that is, that a son of David would once again be put forward as the leader of the people. This is not to say that David’s *kingdom* would be restored (an event that will happen at the second coming), but that the *house* would be restored—a rightful heir would come from David’s line. This is clearly the Messiah.

When the Messiah comes—the rightful heir of David—the Gentiles will seek the Lord, according to James’ quotation. The tricky part here is the Hebrew text of the passage which varies dramatically, and says the people will possess the remnant of Edom. This is clearly a major textual variant. It would be plausible to suggest that James is using the LXX instead of the Hebrew text, but this is not a complete answer, since the LXX depends on the Hebrew. Instead, it is likely that the Hebrew text that James was relying on has some textual variations from the Hebrew text we now have. A summary is below.[[11]](#footnote-12)

Regardless, James understands this passage to refer to Gentile salvation, and we should as well. (It is significant that the remainder of Amos 9:12 makes far more sense with James’ reading of the first phrase.)

The quotation continues by referring to these Gentile believers as those who are called by My name. This phrase is literally ‘upon whom My name has been named’ which would indicate that their being under the name of God (v. 14) is because God has already named them with His name.

The final phrase of v. 18 is another addition by James, likely from Isaiah 45:21-22. Again, this passage is in the context of the nations of the world being summoned to salvation in God—a similar theme as Amos 9.

In summary, the coming of Jesus was the restoration of the ‘house of David’ with a rightful king from his line. The event of His coming would be met with the salvation of a new people who would seek the Lord, the restored Davidic heir.

In v. 19, James gives the conclusion which was already effectively settled—that they should not trouble those who are turning to God from the Gentiles. This does not immediately follow from the Amos quote, but a careful reading would indicate that the Gentile turning is directly to Christ, rather than to Christ through Israel—a sign that matters of the Law were unnecessary.

James uses the phrase my judgment, which might indicate that he had some authority. However, this is not a helpful understanding. Instead, James is simply offering what would be a fitting conclusion to the already-reached consensus among the leaders there.

The stipulations of v. 20 will be covered in Day 4.

James’ final statement in v. 21 is odd. He explains that the Law of Moses is read and preached in every city on the Sabbath. Why would James include this statement here at the close of the decision?

A few reasons would make sense.

First, the question of the Law falling by the wayside, which would eventually be the accusation against Paul, is put to the side for those who come from the Pharisees. It wasn’t that James and the apostles were wanting to destroy the Law—on the contrary, they kept it, and were happy to have it read in every city.

Second, the Gentiles who wanted to hear more of the Law would have plenty of opportunity to hear it in the synagogues scattered throughout the Greek world. James isn’t denigrating the Law, or telling his brothers that it should be set to the side—he had no issue of the Gentiles wanted to hear and keep it. Instead, he sought to protect them from *mandatory* law-keeping for salvation.

Day Three Questions:

1. Give a summary of the privilege of Gentile salvation, as well as God’s continued care for the people of Israel. How does Gentile salvation highlight God’s mercy?
2. The explanation of Amos 9:11-12 above is quite complex. However, what does this passage teach us about our handling of the Word of God?
3. What were these believing Pharisees holding onto, and why was it so dangerous?

DAY FOUR - vv. 22-29 - The Letter

The results of the debate among the leaders of the churches have been completed with James’ statement. This leads to the issuing of a letter to the newly formed Gentile churches that communicates this result.

In v. 22, the phrase it seemed good indicates that they believe that the Spirit has led them to this decision (see v. 28). Interestingly, it is clear that the whole congregation is in agreement (at least tacitly) by this point. The apostles and elders, as well as the church at large, agree to send a group of men to Antioch to deliver the message.

The obvious inclusion of Paul and Barnabas was obvious, and the letter could be carried with them to the churches that they had already planted. The other two men are leading men among the brethren:

* 1. Judas, called Barsabas—little is known of him. Some suggest that he is the same as the man put forward to replace Judas Iscariot. Others suggest he is the Judas who is the son of James in 1:13. Neither of these is likely—little is known of him.
	2. Silas—This if the first mention of Silas, and he will become prominent going forward.

These four men are sent with the letter, and represent a cross-section of the men of the church, both those who had ministered among the Jews and the Gentiles.

In v. 23, the letter begins with the introduction to the churches among the Gentiles in the regions where Paul and Barnabas had been sharing.[[12]](#footnote-13) The form is typical of Hellenistic letters.

In v. 24, the letter acknowledges that, although the men who had come were from Jerusalem, they were not teaching the agreed-upon theology of the church there. Instead, they were teaching things that the apostles and elders had not agreed on. This false teaching was unsettling the souls of the Gentile believers.

Their harassment of Gentile believers is further defined as *troubling your minds by what they said* (*etaraxan hymas logois anaskeuazontes tas psychas hymōn*, ‘disturbed you by what they said, unsettling your souls’). Any teaching that compromises the simple message of the gospel will rob Christians of their assurance and leave them feeling confused.[[13]](#footnote-14)

If these were the same men as Paul mentions in Gal 2:11, they may have been a delegation from Jerusalem but one that did not carry the authority of the church.

In v. 25-26, the letter gives the reason for the follow up, and for the inclusion of Judas and Silas. The language of ‘seemed good to us’ is again used, but this time by James rather than Luke. This indicates that the consensus decision to send a delegation with the letter was and indication of the leading of the Spirit.

The letter indicates that both Paul and Barnabas are beloved — a term of endearment that presents the unity of the church behind these brothers and behind the content of the letter.

Both Paul and Barnabas are mentioned as those who have risked their lives for the sake of the Gospel (an understatement, given Paul’s suffering in Lystra).

V. 27 indicates that Silas and Judas are included so that they could confirm the contents of the letter by word of mouth. This would have been important, because as leaders of the church in Jerusalem, these men would have been able to confirm the message of the letter, and to affirm its reliability. Given that they were leaders as well, it would have been apparently clear that the whole church was behind the decision.

The reason for the continual repetition of the seems good language is now given explicitly. In v. 28, the letter indicates that what seemed good to the leaders gather was also the will of the Holy Spirit. That James would speak on behalf of the Spirit makes it clear that these men saw their role as one of leading under the direction of the Spirit.

The three stipulations in the letter parallel James’ statement back in v. 20. They are:

1. Abstain from things sacrificed to idols - This stipulation assumes that the readers had been informed that the food was sacrificed to idols. The participation in the eating would have been seen as participation in the worship, and was therefore prohibited.

Food of various kinds might be offered to idols, but the flesh of animal sacrifices is in view here: “an animal would constitute the only offering of sufficient size that a saleable portion would be left over following the sacrifice.” Such flesh (which would be of prime quality) was freely exposed for sale on the butchers’ stalls of pagan cities, since the temples received more than they could use.[[14]](#footnote-15)

1. Abstain from blood and things strangled - These stipulations come together. Strangled animals had not been drained of their blood. The pagan idol worshippers understood, as the Jews did, that the ‘life was in the blood’, and would therefore strangle the animals, leaving the blood in the meat. This blood filled meat was then offered to worshippers.

“Strangled meat” referred to animals that had been slaughtered in a manner that left the blood in it. Blood was considered sacred to the Jews, and all meat was to be drained of blood before consuming it. The prohibition of “blood” came under the same requirement, referring to the consumption of the blood of animals in any form.[[15]](#footnote-16)

1. Fornication - This is not simply in reference to sexual immorality, but is referring to the pagan practice of using temple prostitutes to lure locals into the temples. The practice was considered part of the worship of the idol, and is therefore forbidden, both on simple moral grounds, and as a prohibition against idol participation.

As is clear, all three are references to forms of idol worship and false sacrifice. The Jews are essentially warning the Gentiles to remain clear of these idolatrous worship practices which would unquestionably have been a temptation after their conversion. Paul deals with these same topics in detail in 1 Cor 8-10.

Some have argued that these stipulations were largely due to the Jewish revulsion against blood and idolatry. While it is true that the Jewish people were against such practices, this is not the main reason for these prohibitions. Instead, as the final sentence makes clear, these were forbidden practices and had to be avoided by the converts.

The enumeration of the four essential requirements for Gentile Christians ends with the concluding exhortation to “keep away” (διατηροῦντες), i.e., to make sure that they do not practice (πράξετε) “these things” (ἐξ ὧν) that have been listed in the previous sentence. This is not a mere suggestion, but a command.[[16]](#footnote-17)

Paul’s council to his converts in Corinth can be helpful here as well. He instructed them that, when they entered the meat market to purchase food, they were permitted to buy anything they found there. In the same way, they could eat whatever was offered to them by unbelievers. However, when they were informed (either by their host or the meat vendor) that the meat was offered to the idols, they were not to eat it any longer. There are two reasons. First, eating at that point would be tacit participation in the worship of the idol, and Paul wants them to avoid that. Second, eating would defile the conscience of the person who informed them, and would confuse them about the distinction between Christianity and paganism. Paul follows these same prohibitions in the churches he plants.

The overall message of the letter is therefore one of freedom. The Gentiles are permitted to function as Gentiles, with almost no reference to the Mosaic Law, and the Jews are permitted to live as Jews, and both sides of the church are to live in harmony with one another, being careful to avoid idolatry.

Day Four Questions -

1. Read 1 Cor 10:25-31. Why do you suppose Paul is so careful about laying out how these Christians should interact with their neighbors in regard to idolatrous meat?
2. What implications might this idea have for us when we are invited to participate in false worship services or practices, etc?
3. What are the implications for us in our day from this letter? For example, what is the danger of adding rules for salvation?

DAY 5 - vv. 30-35 - The Aftermath

The letter is now delivered to the hub of Gentile evangelism—the church in Antioch. The information contained in the letter is received with joy, likely because of the anxiety that the false teachers had brought in, and the mission continues.

In v. 30, Luke relates that these four men, and presumably a few others, travel down from Jerusalem to Antioch. The language details each step of the journey—they are sent away, they go down to Antioch, they gather the congregation, and they deliver the letter. The point of Luke including this is not simply to tell the story. He wants his readers to understand that the word that they had received regarding their freedom from the Law was faithfully transmitted by these church leaders to Antioch, where it would have been disseminated to the Gentile Christian world.

This link is crucial for Luke. The Judaizers were still ravaging the church during his day, and he wants to protect those who read his history from being swayed by them. This narrative indicates that there is unanimous support, faithfully expressed to the Gentile world, for freedom from the Mosaic Law.

In v. 31, the church’s reception of the letter is recorded. Again, this is crucial. Luke indicates that they read the letter, likely aloud (Not every member, but probably a leader from the church—the ‘they’ here is the subject of the next verbs as well, so it must be part of the congregation).

The response is one of enthusiastic joy. This would have included joy over not needing to be circumcised (hardly a surprise) and over not having to keep the detailed prescriptions of the Law, but also joy over the four stipulations. Apparently they had already committed themselves to these relatively obvious rules against idolatry and sexual immorality.

Luke describes the contents of the letter as encouragement (παράκλησις - *to call to, to comfort*). Apparently these words were a comfort to the disciples there. The false teachers had come and shaken the very foundations of what they understood as the Good News of salvation. The letter reestablished their footing on the firm ground of God’s free grace. Their joy and encouragement is hardly surprising!

In v. 32, Luke informs us that Judas and Silas also encouraged and strengthened the brothers in the church as well. The fact that Luke names them as prophets is important. It isn’t that they are foretelling something future, but that they are gifted to communicate directly from the Lord. Their message was likely informational regarding additional implications of the letter itself, and the good news of the Gospel.

Luke includes this detail because, were his readers to wonder if this is truly the Lord’s will for the church, additional prophetic affirmation should silence any critic.

The phrase lengthy message should give encouragement to any who want preachers to speak for shorter times.

In v. 33, Luke affirms that the church in Antioch sent them out again, returning them to Jerusalem. Again, his attention to detail here is still poignant—Luke wants us to be clear that the response from the Antioch church was reciprocation. There is apparent peace between the two church centers, and over the theological matters discussed in the letter.

v. 34 is probably a scribal addition by a later editor. The addition seemed important because v. 33 indicates that Silas departed with Judas Barsabas, but then in v. 40, Paul chooses Silas to travel with. Further, this verse does not appear in any of the best manuscripts.

A simple solution is apparent. During those days there was obviously substantial travel between these cities. There have already been at *least* 5 trips recorded (Paul and Barnabas, Gal 2:1-10; men from James, Gal 2:11, Acts 15:1; Paul and Barnabas to the council, the group back to Antioch from the council, Judas and Silas returning to Jerusalem.) It is simple enough to conclude that Silas, a leading man in the church, would be sent again during the many days (v. 36) that elapsed between v. 33 and v. 40.

Luke concludes in v. 35 with the summary that Paul and Barnabas remain behind in order to preach and teach with a group of helpers. The content of their preaching is not made explicit. The verse simply indicates that their teaching was the word of the Lord. Again, this phrase is filled with meaning. Luke wants his readers to know that these men taught these things, not from their own authority, but as the word of the Lord. Theophilus and other readers can trust Luke’s account, and the content of the letter that Luke includes.

Day Five Questions:

1. Why is Luke so fired up to make it clear that there is harmony between these churches over this doctrinal point?
2. How might the unity between these churches be an encouragement and a warning to us in our day?
1. David G. Peterson, 420. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. F. F. Bruce, 287. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. “This is the only occurrence of the noun “conversion” (ἐπιστροφή) in the New Testament, describing the turning of Gentiles from idols to the one true and living God, trusting in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, Israel’s Messiah and Savior, for forgiveness of sins, rescue from God’s wrath, and eternal life (cf. 1 Thess 1:9–10). Since it can be assumed that the conversion of Greeks in Antioch (11:21), the capital of the province, was already common knowledge, the report evidently concerned the establishment of congregations of followers of Jesus, among them many converted Gentiles, in the cities of Cyprus, Galatia, and Pamphylia (13:1–14:25). The report that Paul and Barnabas had presented to the church in Antioch (14:27) is now given to the churches in Phoenicia and Samaria.” - Eckhard J. Schnabel, 630. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. Members of God’s elect people of Israel are circumcised, and they keep the law—this was true since the time of Abraham and Moses, and since Jesus had not abrogated the law (they could have argued, pointing to Matt 5:17–20 or Luke 16:17), this foundational principle is still in effect. The Pharisaic Jewish Christians argue that Gentile converts must first become Jewish proselytes: they must be initiated by circumcision into the nation (ἔθνος) of Israel, and they must be made to live according to its specific custom (ἔθος) as described by the Mosaic law if they want to be members of the people (λαός) of God. — Eckhard J. Schnabel, 632. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. David G. Peterson, 425. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
6. F. F. Bruce, 290. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
7. Peterson, 427. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
8. Eckhard J. Schnabel, 636. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
9. Eckhard J. Schnabel, 637. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
10. John B. Polhill, 328. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
11. No simple answer is available. However, Peterson does a good job of explaining how the LXX might have read the text differently. “The LXX apparently reads the Hebrew for ‘possess/inherit’ *(yirshu)* as ‘they will seek’ *(yidreshu)*, and the Hebrew for ‘Edom’ *(ʾedom)* as ‘mankind’ *(ʾadam).* The citation in Acts 15:17 adds that they will seek ‘the Lord’ *(ton Kyrion)*, which is implied by the LXX.” — David G. Peterson, 2009). [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
12. Syria, the region between the Taurus mountains in the north and Judea in the south, was a Roman province since 64 BC, the seat of the governor was Antioch on the river Orontes. Cilicia, the region in Asia Minor between Pamphylia in the west and Syria in the east, had become a Roman province in 102 BC but was ruled by native vassal rulers after Caesar’s death, then administered as a part of Syria after AD 17 until it became again a separate province in AD 72. — Eckhard J. Schnabel, 648. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
13. David G. Peterson, 437–438. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
14. F. F. Bruce, 299. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
15. John B. Polhill, 330–331. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
16. Eckhard J. Schnabel, 651. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)