Handout for Lesson 7: Acts 15:1-35 Oct 19,2025

INTRODUCTION

This is our seventh session in the Book of Acts, and today we arrive at one of the most pivotal turning points in the history of the early church. Acts chapter 15:1-35 records a gathering in Jerusalem that would shape the course of Christian history. It's known as *the Jerusalem Council* — a moment when the apostles and elders came together to answer one defining question: *What does it really mean to be saved?*

These early Jewish believers — including all twelve apostles — were sincere followers of Christ. But their worldview, their worship, and their way of life were still shaped by generations of Torah practice, temple worship, and a deep cultural separation from the Gentile world.

Discussion question: *What do you think it meant for someone in ancient Israel to live under the Mosaic covenant? How did those rhythms — the laws, the rituals, the boundaries — shape their understanding of what it meant to belong to God?*

Grace that Saves

Discussion question: *If, for generations, joining God's people meant becoming Jewish — following the Law, being circumcised, keeping the covenant — how might it have felt to suddenly hear that faith in Jesus alone was enough?_*

Peter declared: *"God, who knows the heart, showed that He accepted them by giving the Holy Spirit to them, just as He did to us. He made no distinction between us and them, for He purified their hearts by faith. Now then, why do you try to test God by putting on the necks of the Gentiles a yoke that neither we nor our ancestors could bear? No — we believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved, just as they are." (vv. 8–11)*

And notice Peter's phrasing. He doesn't say, *"They will be saved as we are."* He says, *"We are saved as they are."*

Discussion question: *Peter said, "We are saved as they are," not "They are saved as we are." Why is that reversal so significant? What does it reveal about the heart of the gospel?*

Discussion question: *When Scripture says God writes His law on our hearts, it's describing inward transformation, not just outward compliance. How have you experienced that — the Spirit changing your desires, not just your behavior?*

Discussion question: *How would you define "grace" in your own words? Why do you think it's so difficult for us — even as believers — to live as though grace is truly enough?*

Through the Holy Spirit, God now dwells within His people — enabling obedience not through compulsion, but through love. Those who confess their sins and trust in Christ are cleansed and filled with that same Spirit, who writes God's law within them and empowers them to live in true freedom.

Discussion question: *What role does the Holy Spirit play in transforming a believer's life? Can you think of a moment when you've sensed the Spirit teaching, convicting, or reshaping your heart?*

Acts 15 reminds us that the gospel dismantles every barrier we build. God purifies hearts by faith — not by our behavior, culture, or performance. As Paul would later write: *"For I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes — first to the Jews then to the Gentile. For in the gospel, the righteousness of God is revealed — a righteousness that is by faith from first to last." (Romans 1:16–17)* And in Ephesians: *"For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith — and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God, not by works, so that no one can boast." (Ephesians 2:8–9)*

This is the first great truth the Jerusalem Council affirms: Salvation is by **grace alone** — not through the Law of Moses, not through cultural conformity, not through outward marks or moral effort, but through faith in Jesus the Messiah.

Scripture foretold it, the Spirit confirmed it, and the apostles proclaimed it. From this truth, the church discovered a new kind of unity. The same grace that reached a Gentile idol-worshiper also reached a devout Pharisee.

This was more than a theological resolution — it unveiled the very heart of God. Every other religion tells a story of humanity reaching upward — of people striving to bridge the gap to the divine through discipline, devotion, or moral effort. But Christianity tells a story of God reaching downward — of divine grace descending to meet us in our need. Salvation is not the reward of those who climb high enough, but the gift of the One who submitted himself low enough to redeem us. That is what sets Chrisitnaity apart from every other world religion, past or present — not a false narrative of human ascent, but the miracle of divine descent — the radical gospel of pure grace.

The Grace that Unites

The council didn't end with Peter's declaration; in many ways, that's where the real work began.

Discussion question: *When you think about your own church experiences, have you ever witnessed moments where cultural or generational differences made belonging difficult? What might grace have looked like in that moment?*

God was forming these two worlds — Jewish and Gentile, moral and pagan, traditional and free — into one family. After Peter's testimony and Paul's report, James — the brother of Jesus and leader of the Jerusalem church — rose to speak. Deeply rooted in Scripture, he saw the need for practical wisdom. He

said, *"It is my judgment, therefore, that we should **not** make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God." (v. 19)* "Not make it difficult." I love how James says that. That's the tone of grace.

Discussion question: *James said, "We should not make it difficult for those who are turning to God." What are some ways — intentionally or unintentionally — that we might be making it harder for others to encounter Christ today?*

Grace opens the door. Obedience becomes the journey. But that journey takes **time.**

Discussion question: *James reminded them that the Law of Moses was still being read weekly — meaning discipleship was ongoing. How has your relationship with God changed or deepened over the years? In what ways do you see the Spirit still shaping you today?*

Because knowledge — even right theology — can open the door, but it's the ***practice of love*** that keeps the family together. When the church leads with that kind of grace, unity follows. Because grace bridges differences. Grace listens before it lectures. Grace welcomes before it critiques. Grace makes room at the table — trusting that **transformation is the Spirit's work, not ours, and that it happens over time.**

Discussion question: *What obstacles have we placed in front of those God is calling? Where have we mistaken our traditions for His truth? How might the Spirit be asking us to make room at the table for others?*

The Grace That Sends

The decision at Jerusalem didn't just resolve a debate; it redefined what it means to belong to the people of God.

James stood and anchored his conclusion in Scripture, quoting the prophet Amos:
"After this I will return and rebuild David's fallen tent,
its ruins I will rebuild, and I will restore it,
that the rest of mankind may seek the Lord —
even all the Gentiles who bear my name." (vv. 16–17)

That passage reaches back through the centuries — from David to Abraham — echoing the same promise: *"Through you all nations will be blessed."* The prophets foresaw it, and now, through Jesus, it had begun. God was gathering a people for His name from every tribe, every language, every land — no longer was it by rules or lineage, but by faith in the risen Christ.

Because the story of Acts 15 is the story of God's grace — a grace that saves, a grace that unites, and a grace that sends. May we, too, be that kind of church — a people who walk in the freedom of grace and the discipline of love; one who holds orthodoxy and practicality together; and someone who opens our tables and our lives so that others might see the heart of Christ in and through us.

Additional discussion questions:

What surprised you most about this lesson, and why?

What are two things you learned today?

What is your one takeaway from Acts 15:1-35?