

# Bible Stories for Adults

## The Jerusalem Council

### Acts 15

#### Opening

Gathering: What rules and traditions do we feel are important for Christians?

Today's Focus: The Holy Spirit helped the early church understand that we are saved by grace, not by the law.

Key Verses: *We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved.* Acts 15:11

*I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me.* Galatians 2:20

Opening Prayer

#### Lesson

The Targets (*Acts 11:18*)

What responsibility did Jesus leave for the church and how extensive is it?

Matthew 28:19 = To Go and make disciples of all nations

What would be the most difficult part of this for the early Christians?

Acts 10:28a = Making disciples of non-Jews

Why was this so hard? = God had commanded Jews to stay separate from others

Ezra 9:1a, 3, 6, 10-14 = Jews believed exile and problems were from accepting Gentiles

How was the church pushed when they had not gone to other nations 11 years after Pentecost?

Acts 11:4-5, 9-10 = God gave Peter a vision that Gentiles were no longer unclean

How did the church react to Peter taking the gospel to Cornelius, a Roman centurion?

Acts 11:1-3 = They were furious and scolded Peter for associating with uncircumcised

How did this change after Peter explained how God had intervened?

Acts 11:18 = They were thrilled with the news that salvation was even for the Gentiles

Was this a significant change in God's plan? = God's plan was through the Jews, not to the Jews

Galatians 3:8 = No, Salvation of Gentiles had been foretold throughout the Scriptures

If the Scriptures had announced this, why didn't the Jews understand it?

Ephesians 3:4-6 = It was a mystery hidden until Christ, they didn't have the NT like us

What is one of Paul's many ways of summarizing this important truth?

Romans 3:21-24, 29-30 = There is no difference, God is the God of Jews and Gentiles

First Steps (*Acts 11:19-14:28*)

With this new understanding, did the church make a massive effort to evangelize the Gentiles?

Acts 11:19-21 = Most went only to Jews, Some in Antioch went to Jews AND Greeks

What did the central church in Jerusalem feel about the activities in Antioch?

Acts 11:22-24 = Sent one of their best, Barnabas, to investigate & guide these new Christians

What did Barnabas do when he found that the opportunity was too great for him to handle?

Acts 11:25-26 = Went and brought Saul to help; they witnessed in Antioch for a year

How was the love for others expressed by this church?

Acts 11:27-30 = Sent gifts to Christians in Judea as help for predicted famine

How did the outreach focus of this church in Antioch continue to grow?

Acts 13:2-3 = They sent out their top leaders as missionaries

What did Saul and Barnabas do after completing their journey? = (2 yrs, 1500 miles)

Acts 14:26-28 = Reported success with Gentiles, stayed in Antioch a long time (2 yrs)

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I Heard it on the Grapevine (*Acts 13:13*)

How might the Christians in Jerusalem have heard about Paul's successes with Gentiles?

Acts 12:25; 13:4-5, 13 = John Mark started on first journey, returned to Jerusalem from Perga

Why did John Mark go to Jerusalem when he left?

Acts 12:5, 7, 12 = The Jerusalem church met in his mother's house

Entrance Exam (*Acts 15:1*)

Did the Jewish Christians in Jerusalem accept all of these new Gentile Christians? = Judaizers

Acts 15:1 = Yes, but they said they needed to be circumcised to be Christian

Why did the Jewish Christians feel circumcision was essential to be saved?

Genesis 17:10, 14 = God commanded His people to be circumcised or be cut off

But wasn't circumcision just for Jews? Why were Gentiles also to be circumcised?

Exodus 12:48 = Gentiles could become proselytes if circumcised and baptized (cleansed)

*Circumcise* means to *cut off*, to *separate* = God's people are to be separate from the evil world

Real Circumcision (*Romans 2:25-29*)

Did Paul, raised as a law-studied Pharisee, agree with this need for circumcision?

Romans 2:25-27 = Only if you are perfect and obey all of God's other laws

Since all have sinned, as Paul later explained, what circumcision is necessary?

Romans 2:28-29 = Circumcision of the heart by the Spirit

What Old Testament examples did Jesus give to say that circumcision of the heart is what's important?

Matthew 12:41-42 = Repentant Assyrians & inquiring Africans are greater than unfaithful Jews

So why did God have the Old Testament Jews undergo circumcision?

Romans 4:9-13 = As a sign of His covenant to save those made righteous by faith

What had Jesus said about confusing God's old covenant with His new covenant?

Luke 5:36-38 = It is like pouring new wine into old, dry wineskins - it ruins both

Did Jesus realize that it would be difficult for Jews to accept this new covenant?

Luke 5:39 = Yes, it would be hard to part with their old, familiar covenant that they loved

What happened the moment Jesus died to emphasize that no people are to be cut off from God?

Luke 23:44-46 = Curtain separating the Most Holy Place was torn in half – open access to God

The Reaction (*Acts 15:2-3*)

How did Paul and Barnabas react to the Judaizers pushing for all Christians to be circumcised?

Galatians 2:4-5 = They *did not give in for a moment* and stood up for the truth

How concerned were they that the mother church in Jerusalem may actually feel this way?

Acts 15:2 = Enough to go to Jerusalem and set the matter straight

What kind of proof did they bring with them? = Titus later sent by Paul to Corinth and Crete

Galatians 2:1-3 = Titus, an uncircumcised Greek who was obviously saved

How upsetting and distracting was this issue for Paul and Barnabas?

Acts 15:3 = Enough to correct it, not enough to stop witnessing

Did Paul and Barnabas raise the circumcision issue as soon as they reached the Jerusalem church?

Acts 15:4 = No, they first *reported everything God had done through them*

Did the church leaders have any corrections for Paul's message and/or approach?

Galatians 2:6-10 = No, *they added nothing* (v6) and agreed that P&B should go to Gentiles

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### The Jerusalem Council (Acts 15:5-12)

Who got the discussion moving on the circumcision issue?

Acts 15:5-6 = A group of Pharisee Christians, The first recorded church council was held

Who reminded the council that God had made it clear that Gentiles were accepted as they are?

Acts 15:7-9 = Peter reminded them of his vision and experience with Cornelius (10 yrs)

Note: Cornelius was a God-fearer (Acts 10:2) and never was circumcised

Did Peter now understand that God had made this new covenant apart from the law?

Acts 15:10-11 = Yes, he warned against the yoke that no one can bear

What other proof was given to the council besides the Cornelius story?

Acts 15:12 = P&B's successes - Note that everyone was silent, Spirit was working

Why did they tell about the miracles they did and not just the people who became Christians?

Mark 16:20 = It confirmed that God was working through them

### Pastor Speaks (Acts 15:12-18)

With Peter busy as a local missionary, who had become the leader of the Jerusalem church?

Acts 12:17 = James, Jesus' brother - a very devout person, called James the Just

Had he been aware of Paul's calling and work?

Galatians 1:18-19 = Yes, Paul had only seen Peter & James during his first visit to Jerusalem

What did Pastor James think about what Peter, Paul and Barnabas were saying?

Acts 15:13-14 = Said God took *from the Gentiles a people for Himself* (said of Jews in past)

Did he feel this had always been part of God's plan?

Acts 15:15-18 = Quoted from Amos out of the scroll called *The Prophets*

### The Decision (Acts 15:19-21)

What was Pastor James' conclusion from all of this evidence?

Acts 15:19 = Same as Peter to not put an unnecessary yoke on their necks

Did this mean that Christians were free to ignore God's law and act any way they wanted?

Acts 15:20 = No, they should try to please God in what they do

What did Paul think about telling the Gentiles they had to avoid sin?

Romans 6:15-16, 22-23 = He agreed, we are freed from sin into righteousness

Why was food that had been offered to idols prohibited?

1 Corinthians 8:4, 7-13 = To avoid from causing a problem for another Christian

Why was sexual immorality singled out among all other sins? = Sex was part of other religions

1 Corinthians 6:18-20 = It is a sin against the temple of the Holy Spirit

Why the command against eating meat with blood in it? (Strangling does not drain the blood)

Genesis 9:3-4 = Commanded of Noah & descendants (all people) when meat was allowed

Why was the blood not to be eaten?

Leviticus 17:10-11 = Life is in the blood, blood given to make atonement

Should these regulations apply only in towns where Jews are found?

Acts 15:21 = Yes, but Jews will be found everywhere

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### The Letter (Acts 15:22-29)

How would the church tell the remote Christians this was their decision and not just Paul's?

Acts 15:22 = They wrote a letter and sent it with Paul, Barnabas, Judas and Silas

What important statement did they make at the beginning of the letter?

Acts 15:23-24 = The men who started this mess did it themselves, not from the church

How did they make it clear that Paul and Barnabas were on the right side?

Acts 15:25-27 = Commended Paul & Barnabas and sent Judas & Silas to confirm verbally

What instructions did they have for the Gentile Christians?

Acts 15:28-29 = No restrictions but those James had suggested

### The Response (Acts 15:30-36)

How was this letter accepted?

Acts 15:30-31 = The people were encouraged, the problem was resolved

Did Judas and Silas leave as soon as the message had been given?

Acts 15:32-34 = No, they stayed a while then returned, v34 - *Silas decided to remain there*

What did Paul and Barnabas do then?

Acts 15:35-36 = Stayed in Antioch a while, then decided to go on another journey

### Peter Has a Relapse (Galatians 2:11-21)

What happened during this time that Paul spent in Antioch?

Galatians 2:11 = Peter visited and Paul had to straighten him out

What did Paul have to oppose Peter to his face about? = *Even Barnabas was led astray*

Galatians 2:12-13 = He stopped fellowship with Gentiles when Jewish Christians came

What did Paul say to straighten Peter out?

Galatians 2:14-21 = He reminded him that we are all one in the faith of Christ

Note: Galatians was written by Paul to counter problems spread by Judaizers

### Closing Prayer

### Response - Consider and meditate on one each day this week

1. What lessons have God needed to teach me over and over?  
(Acts 10:15-16, 27-29; 11:18; 15:1, 5-21; Nehemiah 9:13-31; Matthew 15:16; 16:5-12; Luke 24:25-27; Romans 7:14-24; 2 Peter 3:9)
2. What traditions have I turned into law for me and others?  
(Acts 15:1; Isaiah 1:11-17; Amos 4:4-5; Matthew 9:11-13; 12:7-14; 23:13, 23-28; Galatians 2:4-5)
3. What expectations do I have for others that I am unable to meet?  
(Acts 15:10; 2 Samuel 12:5-7; Matthew 7:1-5; Romans 2:1-8; 14:1-13; James 4:11-12)
4. How quick am I to accept the truth when it goes against something I've known for long?  
(Acts 11:1-3, 18; 15:1, 5, 13-21; 26:9-20; Matthew 11:14; Ephesians 3:4-6)
5. How ready & willing am I to stand up for the truth even when others are committed to their position?  
(Acts 15:1-2; Gal. 2:4-5; 1 Kings 18:16-22; 19:13-15, 18; 22:1-28; Esther 4; Matt. 26:31-35, 69-75)