

The Jerusalem Group



SABBATH—AUGUST 18

READ FOR THIS WEEK’S LESSON: Acts 15; Galatians 2:11–13; Exodus 12:43–49; Romans 3:30; Leviticus 18:30.

MEMORY VERSE: “‘We believe it is by the loving-favor of the Lord Jesus that we are saved. They [the non-Jews] are saved from the punishment of sin the same way’ ” (Acts 15:11, NLV).

AFTER TWO YEARS, Paul and Barnabas came back to Antioch in Syria. They told the church about their work. Paul and Barnabas did not brag about the things they did. They told the church how God used them to do His work.

What is the reason for their report? Paul and Barnabas want to tell the church about their success in sharing the Good News with the non-Jews. After Cornelius accepts Jesus, many other non-Jews join the church too. But several Jewish believers have a big problem with non-Jews joining the church. Why? Because the non-Jews are not circumcised. Circumcised means that the extra skin on the end of the male sex parts is cut off. Jewish males are circumcised to show they belonged to God. So, many Jewish believers are not happy when large numbers of non-Jews join the church. The Jewish believers feel that the non-Jews need to be circumcised first. Then they can join the church.

Acts 15 talks about this problem and how the Jerusalem Group solved it. The Jerusalem Group made big decisions for the church. They met to solve different problems in the church during this important time in New Testament history.



Paul and Barnabas told the church how God used them to do His work.

THE PROBLEM WITH THE NON-JEWS (Acts 15:1–5)

From the beginning, the church at Antioch in Syria has both Jewish members and non-Jewish members who are not circumcised (Acts 11:19–21; Galatians 2:11–13). Remember, circumcised means the extra skin on the end of the male sex parts is cut off. The two different groups of people live in peace with each other. But then that peace is broken when some believers arrive in Antioch from Jerusalem.

Read Acts 15:1–5. From what these verses show us, what is the problem in the Antioch church?

The believers from Jerusalem are known as Judaizers. Judaizers believe that non-Jews need to be circumcised first. Then the non-Jews must obey all the laws of Moses before they can join the church. The Judaizers may have been the same group of people that Luke talks about in Luke 15:5. These men are Pharisees. Pharisees were a group of Jews who were very strict about obeying the law. No one from the church in Jerusalem sends the Judaizers to Antioch (Acts 15:24). But later on, something happens in the church that shows us that many Jews and church leaders are not very happy. They do not want non-Jews to join the church (Galatians 2:11–13).

In his letter to the Galatian churches, Paul does not say nice things about the Judaizers. Paul says the Judaizers are troublemakers (Galatians 1:7; Galatians 5:10) and people who “pretended [behaved as] to be believers” (Galatians 2:4, NIV). Paul says these false Christians wanted to take away the Galatians’ freedom that they found in Jesus and make the Galatians slaves to obeying the Jewish laws.

The Judaizers say that non-Jews need to be circumcised first and keep all the Jewish laws before they can be saved. The Judaizers believe that being circumcised is the only way to become a member of God’s people (Genesis 17:9–14; Exodus 12:48). The Judaizers say non-Jews can be saved only if they become Jews first.

Paul and Barnabas do not agree with the Judaizers’ teaching because it does not match the Good News. But the Judaizers’ visit leads to a very angry discussion in the church about the problem. The problem is too important to be solved only by the church in Antioch. The peace of the whole Christian church is in danger of becoming broken. So, the leaders in Antioch send Paul and Barnabas, along with other believers, to Jerusalem to solve the problem.



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THE REASON FOR THE FIGHT (Romans 3:30)

One of the reasons for the fight between the believers in Antioch and the Jews from Jerusalem was circumcision. Circumcision means that the extra skin on the end of the male sex parts is cut off. Jewish males had the extra skin cut off eight days after they were born to show they belonged to God. Circumcision was not something the Jews added to their plan of worship. God Himself commanded circumcision. Circumcision was a word picture for God's Special Agreement with Abraham's future children. Circumcision showed that the Jews were God's people.

Read about circumcision in Exodus 12:43–49. Who else needed to be circumcised? To be circumcised means having the extra skin on the end of the male sex parts cut off.

The promises in God's Special Agreement with His people are not only for the Israelites. God's promises also include any slave or stranger who wishes to experience God's promises. But the slave and the stranger need to be circumcised first. After circumcision, God will then accept the stranger in the same way that He accepts someone who is born a Jew. "He [the non-Jew] will be like [the same as] one who is born in the land" (Exodus 12:48, NLV).

So, in Bible times, a man needs to be circumcised so that he can be a part of God's Special Agreement with His people. That is why the Jewish teachers from Jerusalem say that no non-Jews can be saved until they become Jews first.

Read what Paul says about circumcision in Romans 3:30; 1 Corinthians 7:18; Galatians 3:28; and Galatians 5:6. What does Paul believe about circumcision?

The false teachers say that non-Jews can be saved only if they became Jews first. But just because someone is a member of God's people does not mean that this person is saved. God saves Abraham by faith **before** he is circumcised, not after. The problem is that the Jewish teachers believe that being circumcised makes them right with God. So, to force non-Jews to be circumcised is to twist the Good News. Paul can never agree with this idea.

What danger is there in thinking that all we need to do to be saved is to join the right church?



God's promises also include any slave or stranger who wishes to experience God's promises.

THE LONG TALK (Acts 15:7–11)

In Acts 15:7–11, Luke tells us about the long group discussion that church leaders in Jerusalem have about the non-Jews. What does Peter say about the problem?

Luke does not tell us everything that people said in the meeting. It would be interesting to know what else the false teachers said (Acts 15:5) and how Paul and Barnabas answered them (Acts 15:1). Luke gives us only Peter's and James's sermons. But that fact shows us that both men were very important among the apostles. The apostles were the men Jesus chose to lead His church after He went to heaven.

Peter talks to the apostles and other church leaders. He reminds them about his experience with Cornelius, a non-Jew, many years before. God Himself showed Peter that He approved of Cornelius's becoming a Christian. Cornelius was not circumcised. Circumcised means the extra skin on the end of the male sex parts is cut off. Jewish males were circumcised eight days after they were born to show they were part of God's chosen people. God showed the Jewish Christians that He accepted Cornelius by giving him the same gift of the Holy Spirit that He gave the apostles at Pentecost. Remember, Pentecost was the time when God poured His Spirit on the church after Jesus went to heaven.

God uses Peter to show the believers from Judea that He saves both Jews and non-Jews alike. No one can say anymore that the non-Jews are not clean. Why? Because God Himself makes their hearts clean. Peter's final words sound almost the same as what Paul might say: " 'We believe it is by the loving-favor of the Lord Jesus that we are saved. They [the non-Jews] are saved from the punishment of sin the same way' " (Acts 15:11, NLV).



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In Acts 15:13–21, James suggests a way to solve the problem with the non-Jews. What does James think will help solve the problem?

James's talk shows us that he was a leader with lots of power (read also Acts 12:17; Acts 21:18; Galatians 2:9, 12). James wanted to show everyone that God already allowed non-Jews to join the people of God and to become a part of Israel. So, James decided that the church should not force non-Jews to follow Jewish rules.

THE FOUR RULES FOR ALL BELIEVERS

(Acts 15:28, 29)

Read Acts 15:28, 29. The Jerusalem Group was a group of leaders who made big decisions for the church. What four things does the Jerusalem Group say that believers must not do?

The Jerusalem Group said that humans are saved by God's loving favor, not by their own works. So, believers did not need to be circumcised. To be circumcised means that the extra skin on the end of the male sex parts is cut off. But the Jerusalem Group said that believers must **not** do four things: (1) They must not eat meat offered to statues and then sold in the markets. (2) They must not eat blood. (3) They must not eat the meat of animals that have been strangled. That means the meat from animals whose blood had not been drained from their bodies. (4) They should not have any sex that breaks God's law.

The first three rules about food were things that the Jews really hated. So, these laws were meant to help the Jews and the non-Jews to get along better. Most Christians today feel that the first three laws about food no longer need to be followed. Also, some Christians today say that the Sabbath commandment (Exodus 20:8–11) no longer needs to be followed because it is not on this "new" list of rules. They say that the food laws in Leviticus 11 do not need to be followed either, because they are not on this "new" list.

These four laws were **not** a new list of rules for Christians that threw out all other rules in the Old Testament. Clearly, the Holy Spirit led the church leaders to write these four laws (Acts 15:28). The four laws came from the rules found in Leviticus 17–18 that talk only about foreigners living in the land of Israel.

When we read these chapters in Leviticus, we see that the rules are about foreigners giving up their worship of nature and false gods. Any foreigner who wanted to live in Israel had to give up his or her beliefs in false gods (Leviticus 18:30). In the same way, any believing non-Jews who wanted to join the church had to give up their worship of false gods. They needed to keep God's law holy. They also needed to follow the rules about clean and unclean foods. In the same way, we must follow these rules always.

How can we solve church problems in a spirit of love?



Any stranger from another country who wanted to live in Israel had to give up his or her beliefs in false gods (Leviticus 18:30).

THE LETTER FROM JERUSALEM (Acts 15:22–29)

Read Acts 15:22–29. As these verses show us, how does the Jerusalem church follow the decision made by the Jerusalem Group? The Jerusalem Group was a group of leaders who made big decisions for the church.

First, the leaders of the Jerusalem church wrote a letter to the non-Jewish believers about their decision. This letter was written in A.D. 49. It is one of the oldest church papers today. The Jerusalem church also chose Judas Barsabas and Silas to go with Paul and Barnabas to Antioch. Judas and Silas's job was to carry the letter to the leaders in Antioch and to tell the Antioch church that the letter was true.

Read Acts 15:30–33. How does the church in Antioch answer the letter?



Judas Barsabas and Silas joined Paul and Barnabas. Judas Barsabas and Silas had the job of carrying the letter from the church leaders in Jerusalem to Antioch and telling the Antioch church that the letter was true.

The church in Antioch was filled with joy because the message in the letter gave them hope. The letter said that none of the non-Jewish believers needed to be circumcised. To be circumcised means that the extra skin on the end of the male sex parts is cut off. The church in Antioch agreed with the four rules in the letter that the Jerusalem church sent them.

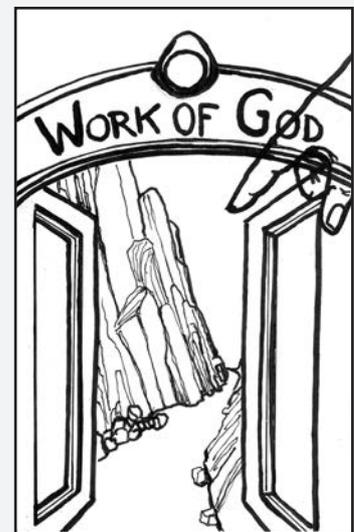
How does the meeting in Jerusalem end? The church leaders in Jerusalem accept Paul's teaching about Jesus. The leaders now accept and trust Paul and Barnabas fully (Galatians 2:9). But there are some Jewish Christians who continue to try to earn God's gift of being saved. No doubt these Jewish Christians will have a hard time eating at the same table with non-Jewish believers. Why? Because under the new rules, the non-Jewish believers do not need to be "clean" to be saved. Ellen G. White says, "Not all of Jesus' followers were ready to accept the decision of the Jerusalem Group."—*The Acts of the Apostles [leaders and teachers]*, page 197, adapted.

Be honest: Is it hard for you to eat with believers who are different from you? These believers may be from different countries, race groups, or they may follow different ways of life. How can you let go of your wrong feelings and learn to get along with these believers?

ADDITIONAL THOUGHT: “God opens up the way for the Jewish Christians to do His work. But they do not do the work as fast as God wants them to. The work that the church leaders do among the non-Jews clearly shows that the number of non-Jewish believers will be a lot bigger than the number of Jewish believers. The Jews worry about what will happen if the non-Jews do not keep Jewish laws. Then the special laws, beliefs, and behaviors that make the Jews different will be gone. And those special things will not be seen in the lives of the non-Jewish believers who accept the Good News that Jesus saves us from sin.”—Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles [leaders and teachers]*, page 189, adapted.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- ① In class, go back to Monday’s last question. We know that belonging to the “right” church does not mean we are saved, right? Think about Israel’s example in the Old Testament. Clearly, Israel was the “right church.” But that does not mean that every person in Israel was saved. Our being members of the true church does not mean we will be saved either. So then, what is the real reason why we should belong to the true church?
- ② One of the most important decisions the church in New Testament times made was about how to accept non-Jewish believers into the church. Should these non-Jewish believers be circumcised? To be circumcised means the extra skin on the end of the male sex parts is cut off. What problems do we see in the church today? What do the church leaders in Acts 15 teach us about how to solve these problems?
- ③ In class, ask some people to be the Jews in the book of Acts who say that non-Jews must become Jews first before they can join the church. Now ask these “Jews” to give reasons to support their beliefs. Why do they say that non-Jews must become Jews first before they can join the church? How do you answer them? How does this experience show us that the problems in the early church were harder to solve than we think?



“God opens up the way for the Jewish Christians to do His work.”—Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles [leaders and teachers]*, page 189, adapted.