



ACTS: JUST THE BEGINNING

ACTS 15:1-18

STUDY GUIDE
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ACTS 15:1-18 ESV

1 But some men came down from Judea and were teaching the brothers, "Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved." 2 And after Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and debate with them, Paul and Barnabas and some of the others were appointed to go up to Jerusalem to the apostles and the elders about this question. 3 So, being sent on their way by the church, they passed through both Phoenicia and Samaria, describing in detail the conversion of the Gentiles, and brought great joy to all the brothers. 4 When they came to Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the church and the apostles and the elders, and they declared all that God had done with them. 5 But some believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees rose up and said, "It is necessary to circumcise them and to order them to keep the law of Moses." 6 The apostles and the elders were gathered together to consider this matter. 7 And after there had been much debate, Peter stood up and said to them, "Brothers, you know that in the early days God made a choice among you, that by my mouth the Gentiles should hear the word of the gospel and believe. 8 And God, who knows the heart, bore witness to them, by giving them the Holy Spirit just as he did to us, 9 and he made no distinction between us and them, having cleansed their hearts by faith. 10 Now, therefore, why are you putting God to the test by placing a yoke on the neck of the disciples that neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear? 11 But we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will." 12 And all the assembly fell silent, and they listened to Barnabas and Paul as they related what signs and wonders God had done through them among the Gentiles. 13 After they finished speaking, James replied, "Brothers, listen to me. 14 Simeon has related how God first visited the Gentiles, to take from them a people for his name. 15 And with this the words of the prophets agree, just as it is written, 16 "'After this I will return, and I will rebuild the tent of David that has fallen; I will rebuild its ruins, and I will restore it, 17 that the remnant of mankind may seek the Lord, and all the Gentiles who are called by my name, says the Lord, who makes these things 18 known from of old.'

STRUCTURE

- I. The Problem: Judaizers Corrupt the Gospel (1)
- II. The Approach: A Council is Needed (2-5)
 - a. Paul, Barnabas, and others sent from Antioch to Jerusalem (2)
 - b. They share about Gentile conversions along the way:
 - i. Inspiring joy in Phoenicia and Samaria (3)
 - ii. Provoking debate upon arrival in Jerusalem (4-5)
- III. The Council: Leaders Deliberate (6-18)
 - a. Apostles and elders gather to discuss (6)
 - b. Three speeches:
 - i. Peter identifies the Spirit's work among Gentiles (7-11)
 - ii. Paul and Barnabas identify the Spirit's work among Gentiles (12)
 - iii. James shows how the Spirit's work aligns with Scripture (13-18)

**Note: James's speech continues, and we will study the rest of it next week.*

GENERAL COMMENTARY:

The passage begins with what we call an adversative—"But"—foreshadowing the debate that follows. The previous two chapters had produced a highlight reel of God's amazing work among Gentiles—"But"—"troublemakers" (v. 24) threatened to turn those highlights into a blooper reel. It came down to theology: what must Gentiles (non-Jews) do to be saved?

According to these troublemakers, Gentiles had to not only become Christian but also Jewish, circumcising their males and keeping Jewish laws about food and ceremony (vv. 1, 5). They rooted this practice in the historic custom of requiring pagan "proselytes" (2:10)—also called converts to Judaism (6:5; 13:43) and God-fearers (17:4)—to adopt Jewish customs before becoming part of the covenant community. Therefore, it stood to reason, that Gentiles must become Jews to join the new covenant community also. Faith alone was not sufficient for them. In their mind, Christianity was more like a renewal sect within Judaism than a whole new stage of redemptive history.

As has happened throughout history, God's work preceded theological development. We began observing God's work among Gentiles with the Ethiopian's salvation (8:26-40). Then in chapters 10 and 11, a wild series of visions, angelic experiences, and other providential happenings resulted in an apostle, Peter, preaching to Gentiles whom God baptized in the Holy Spirit—before they ever stepped in water, and without surrendering to circumcision. When Peter recounts the story, Jerusalem concludes, "Then to the Gentiles also God has granted repentance that leads to life" (11:18). In the next scene (11:19-30), not just Peter but others begin preaching to Greeks, and a church is born: Antioch. Jerusalem sends Barnabas to investigate and again blesses God's work among Gentiles. From Antioch, the first missionaries are sent (13:1-3), Paul and Barnabas, who give us the highlight reel of Gentile conversion stories in chapters 13 and 14. Given God's clear work among Gentiles since chapter 8, one would have thought the underlying theological issues had been a foregone conclusion. But they were not. In fact, the Jewish resistance to Gentiles persists through the end of the book (21:21-25; 28:26-28).

The Gentile church in Antioch had been the epicenter of controversy, but they didn't have the resources to resolve it on their own. They needed Jerusalem's blessing—not informally, like they had in Acts 11, but formally: by decree. Besides just teaching us theology, this story shows how important it is that churches interrelate with one another. Sometimes, problems prove bigger than a single church.

The church in Antioch humbly recognizes its need for help, sending Paul, Barnabas, and others to inquire from the apostles and elders in Jerusalem. Along the way, they stop at various churches to tell stories, inspiring much joy—a sign of the Spirit in Acts. Jerusalem welcomes their stories too, but the troublemakers of verse 1 reappear in verse 5, and they're not happy. Paul's supposedly liberal theology is making life too easy on the Gentiles. The same debate from earlier erupts all over again.

So the Council meets. Peter recounts God's work that we read about in Acts 10-11. Then Paul and Barnabas recount God's work that we read about in Acts 13-14. Finally, James steps in to make a judgment that the Council unanimously agrees to. While he affirms God's work amongst the Gentiles, he refuses to attach their decree to experience alone. Instead, he quotes Scripture: Amos 9:11-12. It's a passage about how God will rebuild David's legacy through the resurrected Son of David, and that legacy will include Gentiles. According to James, the stories of Gentile conversion fulfilled Scripture.

What started in the first century continues today. When the Son of David rose from the dead, He began rebuilding King David's legacy—first restoring Jews (Acts 2-7), then Samaritans (Acts 8), and then Gentiles (the rest of the book!). To reach both Samaritans and Gentiles, however, the conversion of these people groups required apostolic blessing to affirm the new work He was doing (Acts 8:14-25; 11:18, 22; 15:1-35). No longer did God require non-Jews to become Jews to join His covenant community. Instead, He would welcome them by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone. God's new covenant community would not be Israel-centric, but Christ-centric.

This is not to say that God doesn't still have a purpose for ethnic Israel (He does), but rather that Gentiles are not second-class citizens. They are co-heirs of the same promises. By cementing the gospel of salvation by grace through faith in Christ alone, the elders and apostles in Acts 15 ensured that the message could reach the ends of the earth: only a pure gospel can guarantee its unhindered progress.

VERSE-BY-VERSE COMMENTARY:

1 But some men came down from Judea and were teaching the brothers, "Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved."

—"But": in contrast to the widespread success of Paul and Barnabas's Gentile mission, a threat to the Gentiles arose from Judea. We learn later that these troublemakers did not have Jerusalem's blessing to teach what they did (v. 24). Also, they were "Pharisees" (v. 5), who were "zealous for the law" (21:20).

—"the brothers": Luke plays his hand. He views these uncircumcised Gentiles as "brothers." Luke himself was almost certainly a Gentile. On Luke as a Gentile, see...

- Col. 4:10-14: *Aristarchus my fellow prisoner greets you, and Mark the cousin of Barnabas (concerning whom you have received instructions—if he comes to you, welcome him), and Jesus who is called Justus. These are the only men of the circumcision among my fellow workers for the kingdom of God, and they have been a comfort to me. Epaphras, who is one of you, a servant of Christ Jesus, greets you, always struggling on your behalf in his prayers, that you may stand mature and fully assured in all the will of God. For I bear him witness that he has worked hard for*

you and for those in Laodicea and in Hierapolis. **Luke** the beloved physician greets you, as does Demas.

- Eusebius's *Ecclesiastical History*, 3.4.6, written in the fourth century: "And thus, in his writings, Luke the physician, who was also of the number of the seventy, being not of the Jewish nation, but a Greek, wrote the Gospel, being himself a disciple of the apostles."
- Isn't it beautiful that over one-fourth of the New Testament was written by a (probable) Gentile? No first-century Jew could have imagined that God would place His inspired word in the mouth of a Gentile. Our Jewish Messiah is the King of all peoples.

—"circumcised... saved":

- Why circumcision? It symbolized covenant membership, distinguishing Jews from their Gentile neighbors. These Judean teachers were teaching that Gentiles who had professed faith in Christ, repented of their sins, and been baptized still needed one more step to be included in Christ's new covenant.
- There was a horizontal and vertical dimension to this. Horizontally, these Gentiles would not be admitted into the covenant community. Vertically, they would not be saved.
- Throughout the New Testament we read of "proselytes" (Acts 2:11)—Gentile converts to Judaism. Jews allowed for Gentile inclusion to their covenant community, but it had always required circumcision. Conversion meant more than "believing Jewish doctrine." It meant "becoming a Jew." These proselytes had to forsake Gentile-ness.
- The debate centers around whether that historic Jewish approach still applied in light of Christ's work. Does joining the covenant community—and salvation itself—require becoming a Jew? The answer will soon be made plain that Gentiles are co-heirs of the covenant with Jews by virtue of faith alone in Christ alone through grace alone.
- Stott: "They were telling Gentile converts that faith in Jesus was not enough, not sufficient for salvation: they must add circumcision to faith, and observance of the law to circumcision. In other words, they must let Moses complete what Jesus had begun, and let the law supplement the gospel. The issue was immense. The way of salvation was at stake."

—Salvation by grace through faith in Christ alone has been challenged down through history.

- During the Reformation, Luther and others contended that Roman Catholicism corrupted the gospel through the sale of indulgences (which relieved one from temporal earthly punishments and also time in purgatory), requirement of the sacraments for salvation, and the necessity of good works to merit final justification.
- It is one thing to say that faith and works are *necessary* for salvation (notwithstanding special circumstances such as the thief on the cross), but another thing to say that they *merit* salvation. James, the brother of Jesus, says that faith without works is dead. True faith works. In this sense, faith plus works are "necessary," because there is no such thing as faith that does not work. This is very different, however, from saying that good works "merit" final justification. Christ alone merited justification on our behalf so that we could receive it freely as a gift. Once we receive it freely, our faith drives us to labor for God's glory, not to earn salvation but as a fruit of it. As Martin Luther elsewhere said, "faith alone saves, but the faith that saves is not alone"—it is married to works.
- Westminster Confession of Faith 16.2: "*These good works, done in obedience to God's commandments, are the fruits of the Spirit, and are the **necessary** result of true faith, but they do not **merit** salvation. The **merit** of salvation is found solely in Christ.*"
- Offshoots of Christianity such as Mormonism and Jehovah's Witnesses insist that we are saved by faith plus works.

—This issue of how Gentiles are admitted into the covenant community—whether they must add Jewish works or not—recurs in 21:21-25 and 28:26-28.

2 And after Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and debate with them, Paul and Barnabas and some of the others were appointed to go up to Jerusalem to the apostles and the elders about this question. **3** So, being sent on their way by the church, they passed through both Phoenicia and Samaria, describing in detail

the conversion of the Gentiles, and brought great joy to all the brothers. 4 When they came to Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the church and the apostles and the elders, and they declared all that God had done with them.

—“After no small dissention and debate”:

- There was “dissention” (division) and “debate” (argumentation). It was not small, meaning the church was hot and divided over the issue.
 - “dissention” (Gk. *stasis*): also translated as “revolt” (Mark 15:7; Luke 23:19, 25) and “riot” (Acts 19:40) *these renderings taken from the NASB.
 - “debate”: (Gk. *zetesis*): can be translated as “dispute” (Jhn 3:25) or “controversies” (Titus 3:9). *these renderings taken from the NASB.
- Sometimes Satan attacks the church from the outside through persecution. Sometimes he attacks it from inside through division. Acts 15 shows us how to navigate the latter.
- Intense disagreements are inevitable in the church. Churches should have a plan for how to deal with them.
- Later in this same chapter, Paul and Barnabas will have a “sharp disagreement” (15:39) and part ways over it. If the first dispute is doctrinal (15:1-2), the second is strategic—whether to bring along an unfaithful brother (15:38).

—“appointed to go to Jerusalem to the apostles and the elders”:

- The church in Antioch could not resolve this dispute on their own. They needed the church in Jerusalem. Churches should not be islands. They should work closely enough with outside churches that they can call on one another in crisis.
- This was not the first time Antioch/Jerusalem churches related (cf. Acts 11:19-30). Churches should cultivate friendly relationships in good times so that when bad times arise, it is natural to look to one another.
- We cannot ignore that the church in Jerusalem was the “mother church” of all churches (cf. Isa. 2:3; Micah 4:2), which does make this situation unique. We don’t have the exact situation today, but we can still emulate their interdependence.
- Stott: “The calling of a Council can be extremely valuable, if its purpose is to clarify doctrine, end controversy and promote peace.”
- Schreiner: “the Jerusalem Council formalizes what was previously informal: the Gentile mission... The formal nature of this decision is evident: there is a council, individuals from Antioch are present, a letter is written, and agents from Jerusalem travel to Antioch to deliver the proceedings.”

—“passed through Phoenicia and Samaria, describing in detail the conversion of the Gentiles”:

- “Phoenicia and Samaria” lie between Antioch (north) and Jerusalem (south).
- The delegates from Antioch couldn’t stop talking about the conversion of the Gentiles, even before they got to Jerusalem, where they would deliberate over this very matter.
- In other words, Paul and Barnabas were already convinced they were right before Jerusalem ever came down with the decree. They did not question the legitimacy of Gentile conversions, as if they needed to be circumcised to be saved.

—“brought great joy to all the brothers”:

- Other churches also affirmed Gentile conversions even before the Jerusalem Council.
- “joy” is elsewhere a sign of God’s presence and blessing (Acts 8:8; 13:52).
- Not just some but “all the brothers” rejoiced. Luke is showing that the church had already come to this decision before it ever became an official decree from Jerusalem. The dissention did not arise because of apostolic waffling; it arose because of rogue teachers who elevated Moses to the level of Jesus.
- As we’ll soon see, God uses dissention to solidify the church’s communication about core issues. This happened when the Arians tried to make Jesus a subordinate sub-deity, and the church established the Nicene Creed. When the “Spirit-fighters” imagined the Holy Spirit to be less than God, the Nicene Creed was expanded at another council in Constantinople, about fifty years later. When the Roman Catholic Church muddled the way of salvation, Protestant Reformers clarified the

meaning and means of justification. Like rocks in a stream, obstructions do not block the flow of God's Spirit, but they do channel the Spirit's work in each generation.

—"the church and the apostles and the elders":

- All three groups interacted with Paul and his companions in Jerusalem, even though "the apostles and the elders" made the final decision about doctrine (vv. 6, 22-23).
- Still, it seems that the church had some voice in the matter (v. 22). They did not appear to be the decision-makers with regard to doctrine, but the church did agree about whom to send as delegates back to Antioch.
- Wise church leaders include the congregation in some aspects of polity (6:3-5; 15:22).
- The church was not in the dark about this dispute. They were "let in" from the start.

—"declared all that God had done with them":

- Paul and Barnabas already related their stories to the churches of Phoenicia and Samaria. Now they proclaim the same to the church in Jerusalem. They will do so again once the formal leadership meeting commences.
- The key is that "God" did these works through them. The church in Jerusalem has a doctrinal matter to decide, but it's not just Scripture they are interpreting. They are also interpreting their experience of Gentile conversions.
- This raises the question of whether we interpret Scripture by our experience or our experience through the lens of Scripture. Scripture must win out—and it will in this passage—but we can't ignore experiences either.
- When Paul experienced Jesus on the road to Damascus, his experience led him to rethink the Scripture. He still interpreted his whole life through Scripture, but we can't discount the role of his experience. Sometimes new experiences cause us to do a double-take: "Wait a minute, what does the Bible REALLY say on this matter?"

5 But some believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees rose up and said, "It is necessary to circumcise them and to order them to keep the law of Moses." 6 The apostles and the elders were gathered together to consider this matter.

—Earlier, we saw that "some men came down from Judea" to teach the churches of the Gentiles they needed circumcision to be saved (v. 1). Now we observe that these are "believers" and "Pharisees." It's easy to see how these "experts" were deferred to by Gentile outsiders.

—"It is necessary" implies that they still see "add-ons" to faith in Christ for people to be saved. They view the "law of Moses" as "necessary" to be saved.

—Not only must they be circumcised but also "keep the law of Moses." This necessitated eating a kosher diet and keeping Jewish days and festivals. In his epistles, Paul will criticize this view:

- Rom. 14:2-6: *One person believes he may eat anything, while the weak person eats only vegetables. Let not the one who eats despise the one who abstains, and let not the one who abstains pass judgment on the one who eats, for God has welcomed him. Who are you to pass judgment on the servant of another? It is before his own master that he stands or falls. And he will be upheld, for the Lord is able to make him stand. One person esteems one day as better than another, while another esteems all days alike. Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind. The one who observes the day, observes it in honor of the Lord. The one who eats, eats in honor of the Lord, since he gives thanks to God, while the one who abstains, abstains in honor of the Lord and gives thanks to God.*
- Gal. 4:10-11: *You observe days and months and seasons and years! I am afraid I may have labored over you in vain.*
- Col. 2:16-17: *Therefore let no one pass judgment on you in questions of food and drink, or with regard to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath. These are a shadow of the things to come, but the substance belongs to Christ.*

7 And after there had been much debate, Peter stood up and said to them, "Brothers, you know that in the early days God made a choice among you, that by my mouth the Gentiles should hear the word of the gospel

and believe. 8 And God, who knows the heart, bore witness to them, by giving them the Holy Spirit just as he did to us, 9 and he made no distinction between us and them, having cleansed their hearts by faith. 10 Now, therefore, why are you putting God to the test by placing a yoke on the neck of the disciples that neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear? 11 But we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will."

—"And after there had been much debate": God's people need to debate to arrive at truth. God makes the truth rise to the surface, not before, but after the debate. Debate helps us consider all sides. The key is that we debate with a Christ-like spirit of love and humility. Chips-on-shoulders and axes-to-grind must be left at the door.

—"Peter stood up and said to them": when the 120 prayed in the upper room, Peter was the apostle who stood up and led everyone. Here, he again assumes a leadership role, but James will have the last word. A shift in Jerusalem's leadership has begun. More on that soon.

—"in the early days":

- Ten years prior, the Jerusalem church already approved of Gentile conversions, saying, "Then to the Gentiles also God has granted repentance that leads to life" (11:18). Later, when the church in Antioch sprouted up, Jerusalem again gave its blessing (11:19-30).
- Peter's point: "we decided this a loooong time ago. And it really wasn't our decision! It was 'God' who 'made a choice' that 'the Gentiles should hear the word of the gospel and believe.'"
- God chose that Peter preach, the Gentiles hear, and that they believe. God decrees who preaches, who hears, and who believes!

—"God, who knows the heart":

- People barely know their own hearts. Our hearts deceive us (Jer. 17:9). They are "deep waters," difficult to fathom (Pr. 20:5). In contrast, God knows our hearts inside and out.
- The relevance of this statement is that the Spirit fell on the Gentiles before they ever mouthed repentance, descended into baptismal waters, or even thought about circumcision. In other words, before human actions revealed their hearts, God knew their hearts. Seeing their invisible faith, He baptized them in the Holy Spirit.

—"he made no distinction between us and them":

- God didn't withhold the Spirit from Gentiles who had not "become Jews"—accepting circumcision and dietary laws—as part of their conversion. Rather, He poured out His Spirit on the Gentiles as *Gentiles*. He received them just as they were. He approved of Gentiles on the same basis as Jews: faith in Jesus Christ.
- Stott: "The central theme of Peter's testimony was not just that Gentiles had heard the gospel, believed in Jesus, received the Spirit and been purified by faith, but that at each stage God did not discriminate between us and them (9; cf. 10; 15, 20, 29; 11:9, 12, 17)... Grace and faith level us; they make fellowship possible."

—"having cleansed their hearts by faith":

- God cleansed their hearts before they ever stepped in water. Baptism is part of the conversion process (Acts 2:38), but technically, we are converted in the heart before we ever do anything with our bodies. At its core, salvation is a heart issue.
- The same God "who knows the heart" also "cleansed their hearts by faith" alone.
- When we say "faith alone" we recognize that faith involves repentance. These are two sides of the same coin. See Acts 20:21: "testifying both to Jews and to Greeks of repentance toward God and of faith in our Lord Jesus Christ."
 - Faith is confidence in God's goodness, wisdom, or power.
 - Repentance is a change of heart towards God and sin.
- Faith, repentance, and baptism are all part of conversion. Faith and repentance equate to conversion of the heart. Baptism is the outward consummation of our inward change.

—"Now, therefore, why are you putting God to the test..."

- Wow, Peter! Is this the same man who cowered like a coward, denying his Lord before a slave girl and two others? Throughout Acts, Luke notes boldness, and he associates it with the Holy Spirit (Acts 4:13, 29, 31; etc.).

- This same language had been applied earlier to Ananias and Sapphira, the hypocrites who feigned generosity to earn man's approval:
 - 5:3-4, 9: *But Peter said, "Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart to **lie to the Holy Spirit** and to keep back for yourself part of the proceeds of the land? While it remained unsold, did it not remain your own? And after it was sold, was it not at your disposal? Why is it that you have contrived this deed in your heart? You have **not lied to man but to God**"... But Peter said to her, "How is it that you have agreed together to **test the Spirit of the Lord**? Behold, the feet of those who have buried your husband are at the door, and they will carry you out."*
 - Ananias and Sapphira lied to the Holy Spirit, which was lying to God, which was testing the Spirit of the Lord. The Holy Spirit is God. When we think we can get away with lying, we presume that God does not see and/or care. We are testing Him. We are like teenagers pushing boundaries, seeing what they can get away with. Worse, we presume we'll get away with it. This is testing God.
 - How does the story of Ananias and Sapphira testing God inform our understanding of these Judaizers, whom Peter accuses of the same sin? Peter's point is that God already settled this issue. He made it perfectly clear. Just like "not lying" was clearly sin, "placing a yoke on Gentiles" was clearly sin. In both cases, Peter goes beyond accusing the people of unintentional sin. As with Ananias and Sapphira, Peter accuses these Judaizers of intentionally violating God's clearly revealed will to satisfy their ethnocentric sensibilities. Just as Paul accused Peter of hypocrisy a short time earlier for making distinctions between Jews and Gentiles (Gal. 2:11-14), Peter—having learned his lesson—accuses these Judaizers of the same. It's hypocrisy. It's mistreating God's people in God's name. It's presuming that God won't see or act. It's intentional. It's testing God.
 - Hypocrisy tests the Lord. It dares Him to see our double-life and call us to account, all while assuming He never will.
 - Peter's language suggests that these Judaizers knew proper doctrine and taught against it because they loved their own culture and hated Gentiles that much. They were willing to teach false doctrine to maintain segregation.

—"a yoke on the neck of the disciples... unable to bear":

- Peter calls these Gentiles "disciples," despite their non-Jewish credentials.
- A "yoke on the neck" recalls the wooden bar placed over animals pulling carts and plows behind them. It was heavy wood. It was unpleasant.
- Metaphorically, the "yoke" represents "the custom of Moses" (15:1). This does not suggest that the Old Testament was just a burdensome law code while the New Testament is all grace and butterflies. First, the Old Testament contained grace. Before God ever gave the law, He rescued Israel from slavery and called Abraham out of moon worship. Second, the New Testament contains both rules and judgments.
- In what way, then, was the law of Moses a burdensome "yoke"? Peter emphasizes "that neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear" it. In context, the question centers on what is "necessary" (v. 5) to be "saved" (vv. 1, 11). Therefore, the law of Moses is a yoke *insofar as people bear it to earn salvation*. No Jew had been able to earn salvation by keeping the law; why would they suppose that Gentiles could achieve it then?
- Other world religions promote some form of law-keeping to earn salvation (or paradise, or Nirvana, or Moksha, or entry into Valhalla, or reincarnation into a better state, or entry into the Elysian Field).
- In contrast, Christianity presents a gospel—good news—that we are saved by grace through faith, "so that no one may boast" (Eph. 2:9). In other religions, the law-keeper gets the glory for his heroic righteousness. In Christianity, we can't boast about our heroic law-keeping, for the Bible condemns us all as sinners. The only One who can boast—in whom we also boast—is Christ Jesus, who kept

the law on our behalf. Jesus alone earned salvation, and He imparts it to us through His sacrifice on the Cross. When we place our faith in Him, He bears our sin, and we receive His righteousness.

- One reason I believe Christianity is superior is that it promotes a God who is superior. Unlike in other religions, people do not place God in their debt to pay them with paradise. No, we are in God's debt because "the only thing we contribute to our salvation is the sin that made it necessary" (Jonathan Edwards). God gives salvation, and the giver gets the glory. Our God is the ultimate giver. He is ultimately more glorious.

—"saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus":

- Earlier, Peter said that God "cleansed their hearts by faith" (15:9). Now, he says that they are "saved through... grace". So which is it? Are they saved by grace or by faith? The answer is—yes. In the words of Ephesians 2:8, "by grace you have been saved through faith..."
- Grace is God's characteristic, which results in our salvation. Faith is our confidence in God, which also results in our salvation. Grace causes faith because God is the one who "made a choice..." that "the Gentiles should... believe" (Acts 15:7). In other words, God's characteristic (grace) leads to His gracious choice that the Gentiles believe.
- This does not mean that God believes FOR the Gentiles (or anyone). Elsewhere, Paul says, "I know whom I have believed..." (2 Tim. 2:12). God opens our hearts (Acts 16:14) so that we see God for who He is. That "seeing" is properly called, "faith." See John 3:15-16, 2 Cor. 4:4-6, and Heb. 11:1, 13, 27 for spiritual seeing that equates to believing.
- Therefore, we are saved through both grace and faith, but grace comes first. As has many theologians have said, "God is always prior."

—"just as they will":

- Peter's point is that God makes no distinctions between Jews and Gentiles in how they are saved. All are saved by grace through faith. This reality places Jews and Gentiles on the same plane. We are co-heirs of the same promises.
- When Paul makes this same point in Ephesians 2, he begins by articulating how individuals are saved by grace through faith (2:1-10), but he doesn't leave it on the individual level (as we often do in western individualistic cultures). He proceeds from there to outline the implications: Jews and Gentiles are co-heirs of the same promises, for the dividing wall of hostility has been torn down, and we all approach the same Father by the work of the Son and through the same Holy Spirit (Eph. 2:11-22).

12 And all the assembly fell silent, and they listened to Barnabas and Paul as they related what signs and wonders God had done through them among the Gentiles.

—"the assembly fell silent": Peter's speech ended with a mic drop.

—"listened to Barnabas and Paul...":

- Barnabas and Paul pick the mic up quickly! This is the fourth time they've told stories of God's work among Gentiles in this story. See vv. 4-5: storytelling in Phoenicia, then Samaria, then Jerusalem, and now at the Jerusalem Council.
- Peter also used a story to convince everyone that God had chosen the Gentiles.
- It's very important that church leaders discern not only the Scripture (which James brings up later) but also the Spirit. God speaks through both! After all, the Spirit inspired the Scriptures (2 Pet. 3:20-21).

—"signs and wonders": as "signs" these miracles pointed to the truth of the gospel, that God has welcomed Gentiles into the covenant community based on faith alone.

13 After they finished speaking, James replied, "Brothers, listen to me. 14 Simeon has related how God first visited the Gentiles, to take from them a people for his name. 15 And with this the words of the prophets agree, just as it is written, 16 "After this I will return, and I will rebuild the tent of David that has fallen; I will rebuild its ruins, and I will restore it, 17 that the remnant of mankind may seek the Lord, and all the Gentiles who are called by my name, says the Lord, who makes these things 18 known from of old."

—"After they finished speaking, James replied":

- For most of the story, Peter has “led” the apostolic band. Jesus gave Peter the keys of the kingdom (Matt. 16), Peter proposed the plan for selecting Judas’s replacement (Acts 1), Peter led Jerusalem’s approval of the Samaritans (Acts 8), Peter spread the Gospel beyond Jerusalem (Acts 9), Peter cooperated with the Spirit to open the door to Gentiles (Acts 10), and Peter convinced the church in Jerusalem to welcome Gentiles (Acts 11).
- In Acts 12, Peter got stuck in prison, and the angel instructed him to “tell these things to James and to the brothers” (12:17). This wording placed James, the brother of Jesus, in a leadership role (in Peter’s former role! Was it necessitated by Peter’s imprisonment and impending death?). James had not believed in Jesus until after the resurrection (John 7:5; 1 Cor. 15:7; Acts 1:14), but here he rises to prominence among the apostles.
- Now, in Acts 15, James makes the conclusive decree (with unanimous approval). Peter speaks before James, signaling the transfer of leadership. Later, when Paul travels to Jerusalem, he will visit “James... [with] all the elders present.” Again, James comes to the fore, despite leading alongside a plurality of leaders in Jerusalem.
- All this to say: the Bible reflects a tension between leadership and plurality. Peter and James sought (and achieved!) unanimity in all their recorded decisions with other apostles and elders. At the same time, these two clearly stood out as leaders amongst their teams. Scriptures like these are why we read the phrase “first among equals” throughout church history. Churches need a leader. Leaders need a plurality.

—“visited the Gentiles, to take from them a people for his name”:

- “visited” recalls the exodus, when God “visited the people of Israel” (Ex. 4:31).
- “people for his name” recalls language that formerly applied only to Israel:
 - Isa. 43:1: *But now, this is what the Lord says— he who created you, Jacob, he who formed you, Israel: “Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have summoned you by name; you are mine.”*
 - Zech. 2:11: *Many nations will join themselves to the LORD on that day and become my people.*
- James is saying of Gentiles what the Old Testament said of Jews alone! Peter does the same in 1 Pet. 2:9-10: *But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. Once you were not a people, but now you are God’s people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.*
- This does not mean Gentiles replaced Israel, but they were grafted into Israel (Rom. 11).
- This does not mean God has no plan for the future of ethnic Israel; He does (Rom. 11).
- Schreiner: “the Jerusalem Council allows Luke to explicitly affirm the continuity of this plan with the restoration of Israel but also to redefine Israel. The people of God are grounded in messianic faith rather than genealogical origin or ritual observance. Gentile inclusion does not necessarily mean the rejection of Israel but flows from the rebuilding of David’s tent.”

—“And with this, the words of the prophets agree”:

- Despite accounting for the Spirit’s work among Gentiles, as relayed by other apostles, the argument for Gentile inclusion is not clinched until here: James introduces Scripture.
- When we seek the Spirit’s guidance, we must ensure that “the words of the prophets agree” with our direction. Once the Word and Spirit align, we are poised for blessing.
- Stott: “Councils have no authority in the church unless it can be shown that their conclusions are in accord with Scripture.”
- Stott: “The inclusion of the Gentiles was not a divine afterthought, but foretold by the prophets.”

—“After this I will return, and I will rebuild the tent of David that has fallen; I will rebuild its ruins, and I will restore it, that the remnant of mankind may seek the Lord, and all the Gentiles who are called by my name, says the Lord, who makes these things known from of old.”

- This quote from Amos 9 comes from a manuscript we no longer possess, but it is very close to the Septuagint (Greek Translation of the Old Testament).
- "After this I will return":
 - In the Masoretic text (which most of our Old Testament texts were translated from), it reads "In that day..."—classic language for what God will do in the last days. The Greek translators understood it as a last days promise.
 - Prior to this promise in Amos 9:11-12, God warns Israel of a coming judgment that will result in near-total destruction (9:1-10). One is reminded of Simeon's prophecy to Mary that her Son would cause "the rising and falling of many in Israel"—a judgment. Jesus turned His nation upside down, saving some and condemning others, which in turn led to the salvation of the Gentiles.
 - Just as the door largely closed on Jews, it largely opened to Gentiles. Amos promised that this would happen. Before Christ returns, He will again fling wide the door of salvation to the Jews, and the door will shut for Gentiles (Rom. 11).
- "I will rebuild the tent of David that has fallen": throughout the OT, we read of David's "house"—his legacy—not his little, dinky, tent. By the first century, David's legacy had become a dinky tent. But God promised to rebuild it.
- Jesus is the Son of David—a new and better David. David's legacy rose again with our Lord's empty tomb. He no longer has a dinky tent but a growing house!
- "that the remnant of mankind may seek the Lord, and all Gentiles who are called by my name":
 - The purpose of David's tent being rebuilt is that non-Jews get saved! David's legacy was never just Jewish. Jesus, our better David, is king over all nations!
 - The Masoretic text reads "that they may possess the remnant of Edom and all the nations who are called by my name." James's text reads like above. How can these align? They both speak of "the nations" or "Gentiles" coming to faith. To "possess the remnant of Edom" did not mean to conquer them physically but to welcome them—a foreign nation—into the people of God.
 - Schreiner: "Edom functions as the lost brother of Israel in the OT who becomes symbolic for the nations. Go seeks to reunite all humanity by the power of the Spirit."
- There is a theological debate about this verse between "Dispensationalists" (think, "pre-tribulation rapture," if you know that phrase) and everyone else. Dispensationalists view this verse as pertaining to Christ's return—that He will AT THAT TIME repair David's fallen tent and establish His kingdom on the earth.
- Everyone else (including me) sees this prophecy as already being fulfilled, at least partially, in the first century. That's James's point. He's saying, "All these signs and wonders among the Gentiles—they're confirming that Amos 9:11-12 has already come true in our midst! David's tent is being restored! His legacy is being established! His legacy is Jews AND Gentiles in a united kingdom under the Son of David!" To me, it seems like a stretch to claim that Amos 9:11-12 won't be fulfilled until after Jesus returns. James's argument would no longer make sense.