

A Study of the Acts of the Apostles  
Week Eighteen  
Acts 14:14-15:13

**Day One**

14 But when the apostles Barnabas and Paul heard of this, they tore their clothes and rushed out into the crowd, shouting: 15 "Men, why are you doing this? We too are only men, human like you. We are bringing you good news, telling you to turn from these worthless things to the living God, who made heaven and earth and sea and everything in them. 16 In the past, he let all nations go their own way. 17 Yet he has not left himself without testimony: He has shown kindness by giving you rain from heaven and crops in their seasons; he provides you with plenty of food and fills your hearts with joy." 18 Even with these words, they had difficulty keeping the crowd from sacrificing to them.

v. 14 – Barnabas and Paul left no doubt that they did not approve of the crowd’s actions. They were raised as Jews and idolatry of any kind was a heinous thing. While they proved to be tolerant of Gentile customs as they worked among them, this is where they drew the line.

v. 15 – They turned this event into a teaching opportunity and tried to warn them of the dangers of idolatry. But Barnabas and Saul could easily have used their Holy Ghost “powers” to become the spiritual rulers of the people. This Gentile crowd exhibited the same tendency that had been a part of the early history of the Jews. Before the Jews had a king, the people decided that they needed a king to lead them. They declared to Samuel the prophet and judge:

They said to him, "You are old, and your sons do not walk in your ways; now appoint a king to lead us, such as all the other nations have." But when they said, "Give us a king to lead us," this displeased Samuel; so he prayed to the LORD. And the LORD told him: "Listen to all that the people are saying to you; it is not you they have rejected, but they have rejected me as their king. As they have done from the day I brought them up out of Egypt until this day, forsaking me and serving other gods, so they are doing to you. 9 Now listen to them; but warn them solemnly and let them know what the king who will reign over them will do" (1 Samuel 8:5-9).

Why did they want a king? They explained:

But the people refused to listen to Samuel. "No!" they said. "We want a king over us. Then we will be like all the other nations, with a king to lead us and to go out before us and fight our battles" (1 Samuel 8:19-20).

It is easier, or so many think, to have someone else, whether a king or god, fight one’s personal battles. But each of us in Christ are to fight our own battles with Jesus as our Lord, God and King. **Are you delegating to someone else your personal battles? Have you surrendered to someone else—pastor, priest, supervisor, or political**

**leader—the role that only Jesus can and should play in your life? Have you assigned undue praise, adulation or dependence on someone whom God has used to help or bless you?**

vs. 16-18 – Except for the Jews and a few Gentile exceptions, the nations were without a specific revelation of God. Yet God in His mercy provided for all the nations, whether they had a revelation of Him or not. And the team was appealing to this innate sense of God and His provision that these Gentiles carried but had assigned to their false gods. Thus they were able to prevent sacrifices from being offered to them.

### **Day Two**

19 Then some Jews came from Antioch and Iconium and won the crowd over. They stoned Paul and dragged him outside the city, thinking he was dead. 20 But after the disciples had gathered around him, he got up and went back into the city. The next day he and Barnabas left for Derbe. 21 They preached the good news in that city and won a large number of disciples. Then they returned to Lystra, Iconium and Antioch, 22 strengthening the disciples and encouraging them to remain true to the faith. "We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God," they said.

v. 19 – It would appear that a Jewish delegation arrived from two cities where Barnabas and Paul had ministered with the specific intent of opposing their work. These were Jewish “anti-evangelists,” dedicated to opposing the work of God. I think of the descriptive phrase used in Revelation:

I know your afflictions and your poverty — yet you are rich! I know the slander of those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a **synagogue of Satan** (Revelation 2:9).

I have known many modern Christians who have romanticized the concept of the Jews as God’s people. But Barnabas and Paul experienced no such romantic notions. They knew that the devil used many of the Jews to oppose the message of life and salvation, and they opposed these Jews in their ministries and in Paul’s writings. If a Jew is anti-Jesus, then he or she is no different than any other ethnic group that would oppose God’s plan for salvation, even though as a Jew they were the caretakers of the Law and the initial revelation of God’s love for mankind. **Does this offend you? What is your theology of Judaism? Where does it fit in with God’s plan concerning Jesus?**

These Jews won over the crowd and stoned Paul to death, or so they thought. The riotous, murderous mob dragged his body outside the city and left it there, as an additional sign of their hatred and dishonor.

v. 20 – The disciples gathered around to pray and raised Paul back to health and consciousness. And then we read something that tells us what kind of man Paul was. He got up and went right back into the city where his murderers were! What courage! What a testimony! He probably bore the bloodied marks and bruises of his stoning, yet he

walked right back to the place of his supposed execution! **You can't get or give a testimony for God without courage and Paul had plenty of that. Do you?**

v. 21 – The team went on to Derbe and had great success there. They didn't stop to "lick their wounds," but went on to continue their work even though their lives were at stake. Again I think of a phrase from Revelation:

They overcame him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony; they did not love their lives so much as to shrink from death (Revelation 12:11).

**Truly did Jesus say that we could no follow Him unless we were more concerned for our life in Him than for our own personal life. Is this true in your own life and walk with Jesus? Are you holding onto your life or losing it constantly so you can gain His life? What can you do today to express your life in Him at the expense of your self-centered life?**

v. 22 – This has always struck me as strange: The team "encouraged" the disciples by telling them that they would experience hard times and tribulation. That's a curious way to encourage someone. But they told the truth, for to experience God's government and rule in your life will cause you to encounter many difficult times and hardships. If you know that, then you cannot panic or fret when the hardships come. And of course, Jesus is our model, for He certainly encountered many hardships on His way to the ultimate tribulation: the cross. **How are you bearing up under your hardships? Are you encouraged? Are you learning about yourself and God?**

### Day Three

23 Paul and Barnabas appointed elders for them in each church and, with prayer and fasting, committed them to the Lord, in whom they had put their trust. 24 After going through Pisidia, they came into Pamphylia, 25 and when they had preached the word in Perga, they went down to Attalia. 26 From Attalia they sailed back to Antioch, where they had been committed to the grace of God for the work they had now completed. 27 On arriving there, they gathered the church together and reported all that God had done through them and how he had opened the door of faith to the Gentiles. 28 And they stayed there a long time with the disciples.

v. 23 – I am always surprised when I read that they appointed elders, for these churches and their members would have been so young in the Lord. But the team didn't put their faith in these elders, but rather in the Lord who was the overseer of the church with or without elders. They punctuated this trust with prayer and fasting, which testifies to the solemnity and importance of the appointments.

This is strikingly similar to the appointment of Barnabas and Saul as a missions' team in Acts 13:1, which was also accompanied by prayer and fasting. These were not committee or honorary appointments, but rather an expression of the Holy Spirit's work in building the church. **Do you serve in any leadership capacity in the church? Do**

**you take that work seriously? Do you do your homework? Pray and fast for the church?**

vs. 24&25 – On their way back to their home base, the team ministered in several other areas, but we don't receive any reports of their progress or success in these areas. Perhaps they didn't see the results that they had seen in the other cities, or perhaps they didn't spend the time there to get the same results. The thing that impresses me about the team is that they didn't try to over-manage the churches. They preached the gospel, got them started, appointed elders and then moved on. All this expressed their confidence in the Lord who started the churches in the first place.

The apostles saw themselves as God's agents, but they didn't allow the churches to become overly dependent on them. They did, however, seem to make the churches totally dependent on God, which is a good thing.

v. 26 – The team had come full circle, returning to Antioch, from which they had started this first missionary journey of the Apostle Paul. It's always good to have a home church. Do you know where your home base is? Does the home base know you? Local churches are not perfect places, yet they are still the basic piece in God's plan for His people. Remember the instruction of the writer of Hebrews:

And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds. Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another — and all the more as you see the Day approaching (Hebrews 10:24-25).

**Are you faithful in church attendance and involvement? Are you being encouraged or encouraging others? If not, what can you do to be more involved? Are you in the right church for you, or are you in one that is more convenient to attend because of your family or because you have attended that church for a long period of time?**

v. 27 – The team gave a complete report to the local church. I would imagine this was because they were accountable to that body and because they wanted to encourage them with stories of how God was moving among their fellow Gentiles throughout the world. It's always good to share stories and testimonies of what God is doing with you and your ministry. **What are you most recent testimonies? With whom have you shared them? If you don't have any recent stories, why not? If you have them but haven't shared them, why not? I'm not just talking about how God has blessed you, but rather stories of how God has used you to bless others.**

v. 28 – There is ebb and flow, activity and rest in any well-paced ministry. You can't always be giving out; you must also receive and refresh. The team rested from their travels and ordeals, getting ready for their next assignment. **Can you rest? Do you rest? Do you take time to invest in yourself? After all, you are what God uses to do His work, so you are deserving of things that will make you more effective for Him. Do you feel guilty when you take some "down time"?**

### Day Four

15:1 Some men came down from Judea to Antioch and were teaching the brothers: "Unless you are circumcised, according to the custom taught by Moses, you cannot be saved." 2 This brought Paul and Barnabas into sharp dispute and debate with them. So Paul and Barnabas were appointed, along with some other believers, to go up to Jerusalem to see the apostles and elders about this question. 3 The church sent them on their way, and as they traveled through Phoenicia and Samaria, they told how the Gentiles had been converted. This news made all the brothers very glad. 4 When they came to Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the church and the apostles and elders, to whom they reported everything God had done through them.

v. 1 – Much of the doctrinal clarity and definition of the early church came out of controversy for when Jesus ascended, He left a legacy of miracles and teaching but not a legacy of self-disclosure. That work was left for the Holy Spirit, who leads and guides into all truth. So the earliest issue that the Church and its leaders had to grapple with was whether the Gentiles had to follow the Law of Moses. The proponents of this doctrine were Jews who presumably had come to know Jesus as Messiah, but they weren't ready to depart from their Jewish customs, which they equated with the only way to God.

v. 2 – I admire the clarity that Paul and Barnabas had concerning the issues of salvation by faith and the Law. There was no more committed Jew than Saul of Tarsus, but when Saul had his conversion experience, he became a sold-out follower of Jesus and no longer a follower of Moses. The transition was thorough and rapid. Saul's fellow Jews weren't that quick to change, however, and many wanted to be a follower of Jesus while loyal to Moses. Paul and Barnabas "took on" these Jewish Christians and debated them fiercely, repudiating their claims.

So the church in Antioch appointed a delegation to go to the source of the teaching and to the home of Judaism to discuss this point with the apostles and elders. We aren't sure how many went with Paul and Barnabas, but this shows that Antioch saw that it had some kind of relationship with the church and leaders in Jerusalem.

v. 3 – Paul and Barnabas worked and preached as they made their way to Jerusalem, making the most of their time. The reports of their work, or should I say God's work, among the Gentiles made the people glad. So if the people were glad, who were those men who were stirring up trouble by insisting that the believers follow Moses? They were probably leaders, for as we've pointed out on numerous occasions, the "people" were often more spiritual and in-the-know than their leaders were.

v. 4 – The Jerusalem church welcomed the team from Antioch. I am writing this from Zimbabwe where I visit and minister regularly. I am always treated so well here. And hospitality is a biblical value and mandate. Here are a few verses that speak to this topic:

Share with God's people who are in need. Practice hospitality (Romans 12:13).

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Gaius, whose hospitality I and the whole church here enjoy, sends you his greetings (Romans 16:23).

Do not forget to entertain strangers, for by so doing some people have entertained angels without knowing it (Hebrews 13:2-3).

**When's the last time you opened your home to visitors, whether for a meal or for an overnight stay? Are you teaching your children to share their "space" at home? How welcome do people feel when they come to your home? Hospitality is not an option, but an expectation for a Christian. Are you fulfilling your obligations in this area? Why not invite someone to dinner this week, or offer to host a visitor to your church in your home?**

### Day Five

5 Then some of the believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees stood up and said, "The Gentiles must be circumcised and required to obey the law of Moses."

6 The apostles and elders met to consider this question. 7 After much discussion, Peter got up and addressed them: "Brothers, you know that some time ago God made a choice among you that the Gentiles might hear from my lips the message of the gospel and believe. 8 God, who knows the heart, showed that he accepted them by giving the Holy Spirit to them, just as he did to us.

v. 5 – You see, I told you that the “troublemakers” concerning the Law were leaders. To be more specific, they were Pharisees. These men wanted to be loyal to Jesus while maintaining their “party” affiliation with the Pharisees. This created a problem for them and the early church. Yet these men played an important role in forcing the leaders to address an important issue. That is why you should always listen to those who oppose you, for they play a crucial role in your development. Your opponents help you understand what you believe and why. They force you to be clear in your thinking and your explanations.

At the same time, you shouldn't hesitate to address your opponents to try to help them understand what you believe and why.

But in your hearts set apart Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect, keeping a clear conscience, so that those who speak maliciously against your good behavior in Christ may be ashamed of their slander (1 Peter 3:15-17).

**Are you answering the questions asked you by those who oppose you? Are you doing this with kindness, realizing that they are helping you understand what you believe and helping you articulate it?**

v. 6 – The leaders met to have the first church council, so to speak. They convened to address this important issue. Notice that the apostles were part of the church leadership

in Jerusalem but weren't considered elders. That is because they had duties beyond the local church, but the elders would have had responsibility for the Jerusalem church. This was such an important issue, however, for the local church that these elders were included in the deliberations.

v. 7 – There was much discussion on this issue. I think that is critical to the resolution of any church issue. But too often there is much preaching or talking, but not a lot of discussion. A discussion means that everyone is weighing in on the topic. I have also been to Israel five times and seen Jews “discuss” things. I can tell that things can get heated when they do. I don't think we should be afraid of some passionate debate on important issues in the church. Insecure leaders, however, often terminate or short circuit discussion because they don't have the patience or the faith that the Spirit can bring clarity in the midst of human weakness and misunderstanding.

**How open are you to listen to others' points of view? Can you disagree with someone and still be kind to that person? If not, why not?**

Peter began to speak and I'm sure his thoughts were highly valued by the believers due to how the Lord had used him. And he reminded the listeners that he had seen God move among the Gentiles firsthand. He knew that the Spirit had been given to them without having to be circumcised and apart from the Law. So with courage, Peter now spoke up for what he knew to be correct. This shows Peter's personal development, for there was a time when Peter would have tried to please those around him at the expense of the truth. **Are you growing and developing into a more mature believer, even a productive leader for Jesus?** I hope so and I hope that these studies are helping you do just that.

v. 8 – Peter got to the heart of the matter and the heart is that God knows the heart. It was on that basis that He gave the Holy Spirit to the Gentiles in the first place. They weren't required to follow the Law to receive God's gift of grace. Always remember that you were saved by grace and you need to give the same opportunity to others. Don't insist that they stop smoking or drinking before they come to Jesus. They probably won't be able to stop those things or other sinful activities until they come to Jesus and have the power of the Spirit to help them overcome the flesh.

### **Day Six**

9 He made no distinction between us and them, for he purified their hearts by faith. 10 Now then, why do you try to test God by putting on the necks of the disciples a yoke that neither we nor our fathers have been able to bear? 11 No! We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved, just as they are." 12 The whole assembly became silent as they listened to Barnabas and Paul telling about the miraculous signs and wonders God had done among the Gentiles through them.

v. 9 – Yes, faith is the currency, so to speak, with which we make transactions with God. And not just when we first meet Him but as we continue to walk with Him. Remember two simple verses where this issue is concerned:

And without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him (Hebrews 11:6).

But my righteous one will live by faith (Hebrews 10:38).

v. 10 – Peter put the issue into perspective, for those who insisted that the Gentiles follow the Law were testing God. They were saying that God’s way of faith wasn’t good enough, which was the equivalent of telling God that He didn’t know what He was doing! Then Peter made an admission that was shocking for a Jew: He acknowledged that the Jews were never able to keep the Law! It sounded like Peter was relieved to be living by faith and not by legalism!

**Are you living by faith or by legalism? Don’t answer too quickly. I’ve known many Christians who are saved by faith, but now live legalistic lives.**

v. 11 – Paul and Barnabas were there to recount their stories of miracles and faith among non-Jews. The listeners could not refute or deny the reality of their stories, which testified to God’s grace among the Gentiles. But remember that the Sanhedrin refused to acknowledge God’s miracles among them, instead choosing to maintain their rigid opposition to the faith and God’s work. So we see that the early Church was indeed led by the Spirit, but they chose to cooperate with Him, not oppose Him.

I am so glad that this issue was resolved by determining that the Gentiles didn’t have to follow the Law of Moses. I am thankful that Paul, Barnabas and Peter had courage enough to distance themselves from their Jewish culture and heritage to embrace the new thing that God was doing. This speaks so highly of these leaders who flew in the face of tremendous cultural pressure to embrace the truth of the gospel of faith.

May you and I be as courageous in our generation as they were in theirs to stand for the truth and for what the Spirit is doing.

*Special note: Since the study went so long this week, I will stop at day six.*