



LESSON 35

The Gentiles are saved by faith alone

ACTS 15:1-35



Salvation is by grace alone.



“But we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will” (Acts 15:11).

Supporting Truths

1. Salvation is a gift from God.
2. The only way to receive grace is by faith.
3. Salvation is not by works.
4. Since all Christians are saved by grace, Christians should accept one another.
5. Christians need to resolve conflicts well.

Objectives

1. Define grace.
2. Retell Peter’s story about Cornelius’ family.
3. Explain that some Jewish Christians said Gentiles had to be circumcised to be saved.
4. List the four things Gentiles were to avoid to not offend Jewish Christians.
5. List several principles that allowed this conflict to be resolved well.

STUDY THE BIBLE LESSON

The Gentiles are saved by faith alone • Acts 15:1–35



Lesson Summary

As the number of Gentile Christians grew, some Jewish Christians did not know how to respond. Some did not even accept them as Christians. They thought that the kingdom of God belonged only to Jews, so to be saved, Gentiles had to become Jews first. But the Jerusalem Council—including the apostles and the Jerusalem elders—agreed with Peter and James that salvation is by grace alone. As a result, Gentile Christians and Jewish Christians should live together in peace.

Spotlight on the Gospel

The Jerusalem Council made it very clear that salvation is by grace alone. It cannot be earned, because no one can keep the law. And it is foolish to try to earn it, because Jesus paid the full price. Clearly, the only way to be saved is by faith. Faith is admitting that you cannot earn salvation and trusting instead in Jesus to provide. Because salvation is by grace, Christians should accept one another and put each other's interests above their own.



**God frees Peter from
prison**
Acts 12:1–24

**The Gentiles are saved
by faith alone**
Acts 15:1–35

**The Philippian jailer is
saved**
Acts 16:16–40

THE GOSPEL SPREADS INTO
JUDEA AND SAMARIA

THE GOSPEL SPREADS TO THE REMOTEST PART OF THE EARTH

Lesson Commentary

Salvation is by grace alone.

Conflict in the church happens because Christians are still not perfect. Conflict is especially common when big changes are taking place, as they were just before Acts 15. Paul and Barnabas had just finished their first missionary journey, and now there were more Gentiles becoming Christians than Jews (Acts 13:46–49; 14:27). Conflict arose over how Jews and Gentiles were saved: do they belong to the same body of Christ? And if so, how should they interact?

The question of the Law created conflict (15:1–5)

James had already cautioned Peter about interacting with Gentiles (Gal 2:12). He was probably trying to protect Jewish Christians in Jerusalem, since Jews hated it when Jewish Christians treated Gentiles as equals. But there were Jews in the Jerusalem church that did not think James went far enough (Acts 15:1, 24). They said Gentiles could not be saved until they first became Jews (15:1). To become Jews, they needed to be *circumcised*—get a special surgery that was a sign of God's covenant with Abraham (Gen 17:10–14). These Jews were right that salvation comes through Abraham (12:1–3), but they did not understand that faith is what makes someone a descendant of Abraham (Gal 3:29; Rom 4:9–12). Paul and Barnabas went to Jerusalem to resolve this for the whole church (Acts 15:2). If the church was to continue its mission of spreading the gospel, it had to know what is necessary for salvation!

The council answered the question of salvation (15:6–19)

The council had authority to answer this question because it was made up of apostles (Eph 2:20) and elders (Acts 15:6; 14:23; 1 Pet 5:1–5). Peter spoke first by retelling his experience at Cornelius' house (Acts 15:7–11; 10:44–48). Cornelius and his family had all received the Spirit, a sure mark of salvation (Rom 8:9; 1 Cor 12:13). Also, they had received the Spirit just like the Jews had at Pentecost, showing that God made no distinction between circumcised and uncircumcised people (Acts 15:9). In fact, Cornelius' family received the Holy Spirit even

before they had a chance to express their faith though baptism (10:44). The only explanation was that God looked into their hearts, saw their faith, and cleansed them on the basis of faith alone (15:9; Eph 1:7; 2:8–9). Therefore, there was no need to add more requirements for them to be saved.

Peter also reminded the Jewish believers of what they already knew: even they could not live up to their legal traditions (Acts 15:10). Jesus had called the laws a burden too heavy to bear (Matt 23:4), and He had invited sinners to take His yoke instead, one that is easy and light and gives spiritual rest (11:28–30). His yoke is easy because it is by *grace—a gift that we cannot earn* (Acts 15:11). Jesus earned it for us, and all we have to do is believe that He did. But as soon as we begin to think that we must accomplish even a tiny part of salvation, we deny that Jesus' death paid it all (Gal 2:21). As soon as we say we must do anything to earn His grace, it stops being grace (Rom 4:4). Only *faith—trusting in Christ's power and not in your own*—allows grace to be free (4:15–16).

Barnabas and Paul confirmed Peter's words (Acts 15:12), but James gave the final word (15:13–19).

James was the leader of the Jerusalem church. He was the half-brother of Jesus, but the reason he was so respected was because of his personal character. He was called James the Just—he observed the law, he made sure to care for the poor (Gal 2:10), and he wrote the book of James emphasizing integrity, humility, and caring for the needy. Some Jewish believers may have been suspicious of Paul, Barnabas, and even Peter, but when James said, “Listen to me” (15:13), they listened.

James first affirmed Peter's argument in a stunning way. He said God was taking from the Gentiles a

THINK ABOUT IT

Like shepherds caring for their sheep, elders are to guard the church from false teaching and protect it from division (Acts 20:28–31).



THINK ABOUT IT

We are justified by faith apart from works of the law (Rom 3:28).



STUDY THE BIBLE LESSON

The Gentiles are saved by faith alone • Acts 15:1–35



people for His name (15:14). In the Old Testament, those words described how God took Israel out from among the Gentiles to be His chosen people (Deut 14:2). But now James was saying something new: God was actually making Gentiles His people! Since Israel failed to proclaim God's name, God was now giving this role to the church, which from that point on would be made up mostly of Gentiles.

To make this clear, James reminded Jewish believers that this is what their own prophets predicted. Specifically, Amos had spoken of a time when Gentiles would be called by God's name (Acts 15:16–17; Amos 9:11–12). Amos did not say Gentiles would become Jews, and as a result be called by God's name. Rather, they would be called by God's name while still being Gentiles. This was nothing for the Jews to be angry about, for it was fulfilling their own hopes! They longed for David's dynasty to regain power, not just over Israel but over all nations, just as Amos predicted. And now they were seeing evidence of this with their own eyes: Gentiles from many nations were voluntarily submitting to Jesus, the Son of David. There was no reason to burden the Gentiles with laws they themselves could not keep. They were already saved and members of the church without being circumcised (15:19).

The council answered the question of fellowship (15:20–35)

If Christians include both Jews and Gentiles, how can they get along? Before, James had advised some separation between Jew and Gentile to protect his flock in Jerusalem from persecution. Now, he realized that the gospel and church unity were more important, so he did not stop Jew and Gentile believers from eating together (cf. Gal 2:12). Still, it is best to avoid trouble if possible, so James urged Gentiles to be considerate of their Jewish brothers. For the sake of unity, it was necessary for Gentiles to avoid four things: food offered to idols, sexual immorality, meat that had been strangled, and blood (Acts 15:20, 29).

Three of these restrictions are about food. Food is neither clean nor unclean in itself (1 Cor 8:8; Acts 10:10–16; Mark 7:18–19; Rom 14:14, 17). But since food laws were the main cause of trouble, giving up some freedom was well worth it for the sake of Christian harmony (1 Cor 8:9, 13; 10:28; Rom 14:15, 21). Whenever we make decisions about things that are morally neutral, we should care more about others than ourselves (1 Cor 10:32). We should also ask, what will most honor God (10:31)?

The other restriction was about sexual immorality. For the most part, this is not neutral like food. All Christians must be pure (Eph 5:3–5). Gentile Christians needed to be reminded of this, because it was easy for them to be drawn into the sexual immorality that was acceptable in the pagan Gentile world (1 Cor 6:12–20). But James may also have included matters not inherently immoral but still particularly offensive to Jews, such as marriage to a close relative.

James' point was that Christians, whether Jew or Gentile, should serve each other in love. Instead of seeking their own desires, they should do what builds one another up. James also practiced what he preached. He sent leaders from Jerusalem and an official letter to show the church's concern for the Gentiles in Antioch (Acts 15:22–30). He praised Paul and Barnabas to show that he and the church in Jerusalem were not their enemies (15:25–26). He made it clear that the council's decision was unanimous: all the elders and apostles were united in this decision (15:25). They were united by their love for Jesus (15:26) and by humble submission to the Holy Spirit (15:28). As a result, what began as a conflict ended with encouragement and peace, strengthening the church (15:30–35).

THINK ABOUT IT

Conflict is as an opportunity to love and encourage one another for the glory of Christ and the building up of His body.



Lesson Outline

Salvation is by grace alone.



AGES 3–5 LESSON OUTLINE

1. People argued: Is salvation by grace alone (15:1–5)?
2. The council agreed: Salvation is by grace alone (15:6–19).
3. The council encouraged: Be kind to one another (15:20–35).



AGES 6–11 LESSON OUTLINE

1. The question of the Law created conflict (15:1–5).
 - Certain Judeans told Gentiles to be circumcised (15:1).
 - Paul and Barnabas went to Jerusalem to solve the problem (15:2–5).
2. The council answered the question of salvation (15:6–19).
 - Peter: God saved Cornelius by grace through faith (15:6–11).
 - Barnabas and Paul: God performed miraculous signs among Gentiles (15:12).
 - James: the prophets foretold Gentile believers (15:13–18).
 - The council stopped Jews from burdening Gentiles (15:19).
3. The council answered the question of fellowship (15:20–35).
 - The council instructed Gentiles not to offend Jews (15:20–21, 29).
 - The council affirmed unity in Jesus and in the Spirit (15:25–28).
 - The council encouraged believers and brought peace (15:22–24, 30–35).



TEACH THE BIBLE LESSON

The Gentiles are saved by faith alone • Acts 15:1–35



Lesson Questions

Use these questions to teach or to review this week's lesson.



Ages 3–5 Lesson Questions

- 1. What did some Jews say Gentiles needed to do to be saved?**
Be circumcised.
- 2. Did Peter say salvation is by grace or by keeping the law?**
It is by grace.
- 3. How can you receive grace from God?**
By faith. Believe that Jesus died on the cross in your place.
- 4. What kind of food did the council tell Gentiles not to eat?**
Meat offered to idols, strangled meat, and blood.



Ages 6–11 Lesson Questions

- 1. Why did some Jews say Gentiles needed to be circumcised to be saved?**
They thought the kingdom of God was only for Jews—for the nation of Israel.
- 2. Who argued against them in Antioch and then in Jerusalem?**
Paul and Barnabas.
- 3. What example did Peter give to prove them wrong?**
Peter reminded them of Cornelius' salvation.
- 4. How do you know Cornelius was saved?**
Cornelius received the Holy Spirit.
- 5. What did James say about Gentiles being saved?**
God was calling a people for Himself who were Gentiles.
- 6. What prophet did James say predicted Gentiles being saved?**
Amos.
- 7. Why did James tell Gentile Christians to avoid immorality and certain foods?**
Immorality includes things that are always wrong. But Gentiles were also to stay away from certain foods not because the food itself was bad, but to be thoughtful of their Jewish brothers' consciences and safety.
- 8. What was the result of the council?**
Christians were encouraged, there was peace, and the church was built up.

Lesson Activities

Choose from the following ideas to introduce, illustrate, and apply this week's lesson.

AGES 3–5



INTRODUCE

NO STRINGS ATTACHED

Salvation is a gift. Hold a beautifully wrapped present in front of the children. Explain that this represents the free gift of salvation. Ask the children if anyone wants it. However, when someone grabs the present to take it, resist them by holding on to fishing line that has been secretly attached to the present. As they struggle to take the gift from you, ask them if they are willing to trade something for the gift. Is this still a gift? No. Now something must be done to earn it. In today's lesson, we will learn about some Christians who tried to add works to the free gift of salvation but were stopped by the leaders of the early church.

UNITED IN CHRIST

When the Gentiles became Christians, they did not need to become Jews. Introduce this spiritual truth by giving each child three different colored pieces of yarn. Explain that one color represents the Jews, another color the Gentiles, and another color Jesus. Help the children braid the three colors together, pointing out that though the three separate pieces of yarn have been one, each piece of yarn still maintains its original color.



ILLUSTRATE

ABSTAIN

To "abstain" means to avoid doing something. Bring in things you abstain from (foods you choose not to eat, activities you choose not to do, etc.). Ask the children if they abstain from these activities too ("Do you abstain from broccoli?" "What about cleaning your room or making your bed?").

SNACKS

Use snack time to demonstrate differences in Jewish and Gentile culture. Separate the children into two groups. Give one group one snack and the other group a completely different snack. Talk about the three groups of food that James told the Gentiles to abstain from because it upset the Jews (food sacrificed to idols, meat that had been strangled, and blood) (Acts 15:20).



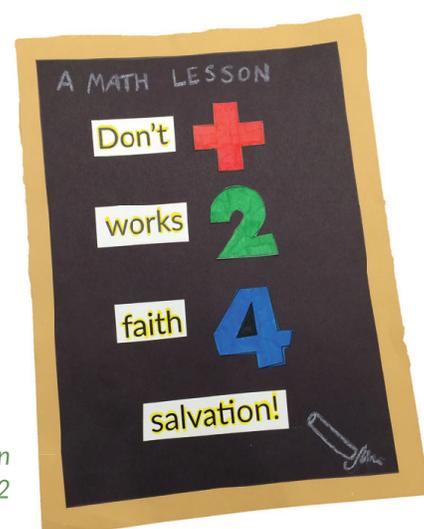
APPLY

A MATH LESSON

See *Year 3 Craft Book, Book 2*.

Materials: Craft sheets, crayons, glue stick, scissors, black and tan construction paper.

Directions: Color and cut all the words, number and the "plus" sign. Glue them the black construction paper. Frame everything with the tan construction paper. (Kids can décor the black board with stickers)



A Math Lesson
See *Year 3 Craft Book, Book 2*

TEACH THE BIBLE LESSON

The Gentiles are saved by faith alone • Acts 15:1–35



AGES 6–8



INTRODUCE

FAITH ALONE

Faith alone is the only way to be saved. Pass out rubber bands and have the children try to hit a bull's eye you know they won't be able to hit. After they have all fallen short, tell them no matter how hard they tried they could never get to Heaven. Do they trust you to hit the target? Take their rubber bands from them, walk to the target, and put them on the bull's eye. Faith in you, without trying to shoot the rubber bands themselves, was the only way to hit the bull's eye.

BUILDING A BIKE

Bring in a bike. Ask the children to imagine two people standing next to this bike, arguing about how to put it together. One presents a detailed plan for putting on the tires, then the handlebars, then the seat. The other argues that the seat comes first, then the chain, then the decals, then the rest. While they continue to argue, a third person walks in and points out that the bike is already built. Salvation has already been put together for us. We don't need to figure how to do it, we just need to believe it.



ILLUSTRATE

THE LAW OF MOSES

The Law of Moses refers to all the commands God gave the Israelites through Moses. It includes moral laws, like do not kill and do not steal. It also includes special laws about the Jewish religion called ceremonial laws, such as not eating pigs and how to offer sacrifices. Because of its many demands, no person could ever obey it perfectly. The Law told the Israelites what they could and could not wear, what they could and could not eat, and even who they could marry. Have the children imagine a lengthy list of rules from their parents that would be impossible to obey, such as never getting dirty, only wearing red shirts, and eating only cereal.

UNBEARABLE YOKE

Bring a stack of large books. Label them the "Law." Ask a volunteer to come hold one. Then, add another. Keep talking about the heaviness of the Law as you continue to add books, until the child is unable to hold them up anymore. Obeying the Law is impossible. The Jews couldn't do it, and neither can we.



APPLY

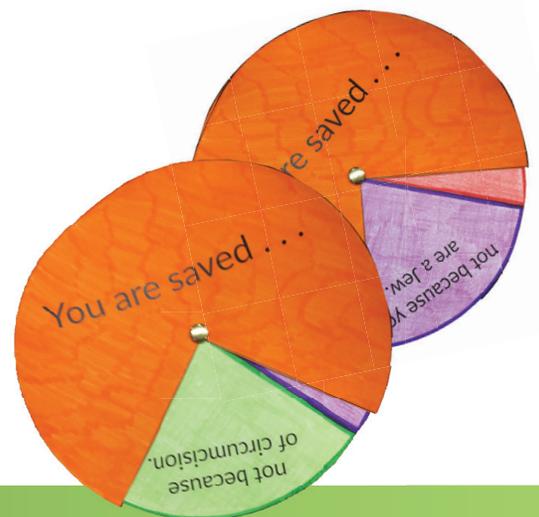
THE DECISION OF THE COUNCIL

See Year 3 Craft Book, Book 2.

Materials: Craft sheets, crayons, scissors, brad.

Directions: Color four answers with different colors. Color the spinning circle. Unite the two circles with a brad.

*The Decision of the Council
See Year 3 Craft Book, Book 2*



AGES 9–11

**“BUT MY DAD SAYS...”**

Does your family have any special rules? Maybe your parents don't allow you to participate in sports on Sunday so you can attend church. Or maybe your bedtime is 8:00 PM. Or maybe you're only allowed to watch television for 30 minutes a day. Whatever these rules are, they're for your family, not another. You can't tell your classmate they have to go to bed at 8:00 PM just because it's a rule in your house. In today's lesson, we're going to learn about some Jewish Christians who were upset with Gentile Christians because they were not following their rules.

HOLIDAY TRADITIONS

Talk about some different holiday traditions families have. Ask the children what would happen if someone came into their house during the holidays and started trying to change all their special holiday traditions. Would they be upset? Why is it difficult to break traditions? In today's lesson, the Jewish Christians were upset because the Gentiles that were being saved and added to the church were not following their traditions.

**CIRCUMCISION**

Circumcision was a physical mark God commanded the Jews to have. It was a reminder that God had promised to bless the Jewish people with their own nation, land, and a unique relationship with Him. The Jews were expected to obey all of God's laws, and circumcision was a picture of their special relationship with God. Illustrate circumcision with a wedding ring. Though it is not a physical mark, a wedding ring pictures a unique relationship. Does just wearing a wedding ring make you married? No! Anyone can wear a ring. The same was true for circumcision. The mark itself did not save. It was just a picture.

CUSTOMS

Discuss ways certain cultures can be offended. For instance, explain the Japanese custom of removing shoes or the Middle Eastern custom of eating with your right hand. It would be rude in their cultures to ignore these practices. Some of the Christian Jews had a difficult time accepting Gentiles in the church because the Gentiles had customs which were offensive to them. So to promote harmony, James asked the Gentile Christians to stop doing four things in order to promote peace between the two groups (Acts 15:20).

**FAITH ALONE**

Trying to add our own works ruins salvation. To demonstrate the importance faith alone, bring in a candy bar. Ask the children if they would like to eat it. Talk about how good it looks and smells. Now talk about how you're going to make it even better! Unwrap it, and begin rubbing dirt all over it. Would anyone like to take a bite now? Explain that the salvation that God offers is perfect and that we do not need to add anything to make it better. And when we try to do it, we ruin it. Salvation is by grace alone through faith alone. By trying to add works to God's free gift, we wreck it.