

ACTS 14:20-28

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 gospel 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. 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 a door of faith to the Gentiles. ²⁸ And they stayed there a long time with the disciples.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

| Growing up, did you ever quit something because it was too difficult? What was it
| and why did you drop out?

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| What did Paul do after being stoned and left for dead at Lystra? Why is it important
| to not let difficulty stop us from fulfilling our purpose in Christ?

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| What was the message that Paul and Barnabas gave to the disciples in the cities
| they revisited at the end of this first missionary journey (verses 20-28)? What was
| the encouragement? What was the warning?

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| What kind of leadership structure did Paul establish in the churches? Why do you
| think this was important for then and now? What do these passages say about
| church leadership (1 Timothy 2:1-7; Titus 1:5-9)?

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| What did Paul and Barnabas do upon returning to Antioch and completing the first
| missionary journey (verses 26-28)?

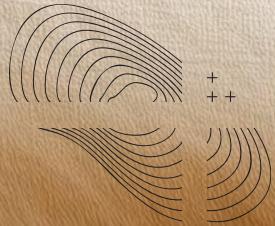
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| What is one lesson you can apply from this passage this week?

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DAILY READINGS

1. PSALM 22:25-31
2. JOHN 17:1-26
3. GALATIANS 6:9-10
4. COLOSSIANS 1:24-2:5
5. TITUS 3:3-8
6. JAMES 1:2-4
7. ACTS 14:20-28





ACTS 15

THE JERUSALEM COUNCIL: A TURNING POINT IN CHURCH HISTORY

As the gospel spread beyond Jerusalem and Judea into Gentile nations, a significant conflict arose in the early church centered around how Gentiles should enter the Christian community. Should they be required to follow the Jewish law, including circumcision? Or could they simply come without adhering to Jewish laws and customs? Both groups agreed that Gentiles are part of God's plan but a resolution for this conflict would be critical for the unity and growth of the early church.

The tension came to a head in a city named Antioch. Some men from Judea, representing the law-keeping faction, debated Paul and Barnabas. The issue had grown so contentious that an appeal was made to get help in settling this matter once and for all. This resulted in a gathering known as the Jerusalem Council between those ministering to the Gentiles (Paul and Barnabas) and the Jewish leadership (represented by Peter and James). It took place around 49 AD in Jerusalem and marked a pivotal moment in the formation of the early church.

For the reader of Acts, the Jerusalem Council signals a major narrative shift in the book. Following the pattern set in Acts 1:8, the first twelve chapters focus on the church's growth in Jerusalem, Judea, and Samaria. From Acts 13 onward, the gospel begins to spread to the ends of the earth. After chapter 15, Peter and the Jerusalem church fade into the background while an account of Paul's missionary journeys comes to the forefront. Before the gospel can spread further, one crucial question must be answered: How can Gentiles enter the church?

The meeting began well. Paul and Barnabas were warmly welcomed by the church and its leaders (Acts 15:4). But the conflict quickly surfaced. After much discussion, Peter stood to speak. He recalled “the early days,” referring to his experience with Cornelius, a Gentile who received the gospel (Acts 10). Though only five chapters back in Acts, a full decade had passed since that event. Peter reminded them all that Gentiles are “saved through the grace of our Lord Jesus,” not through the law. At this, the room fell silent (Acts 15:11–12).

Paul and Barnabas then shared stories of God’s miraculous work among the Gentiles. Finally, James, the half-brother of Jesus, and a respected leader of the Jerusalem church, spoke up. Known as “James the Just” for his strict adherence to the Jewish law, he was likely expected to side with the law-keeping group. But instead, quoting Amos 9:11–12, James declared his judgment: “We should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God” (Acts 15:19).

With that, the decision was made. Gentile believers were not required to follow the Jewish law to be part of the church. God’s grace is sufficient for Jew and Gentile alike.

A letter was written to communicate the council’s decision, urging Gentile believers to be considerate of their Jewish brothers and sisters by avoiding certain practices that could cause offense. This letter, carried to Antioch by trusted messengers, is the only formal decree recorded in the book of Acts.

The importance of this moment cannot be overstated. The Jerusalem Council provided a powerful example of resolving conflict in the church:

- Believers welcomed one another in fellowship.
- They shared stories of how God was changing the lives of people.
- They gathered to discuss and debate the matter honestly.
- They listened to personal testimony and reflected on scripture.
- And finally, they reached a decision that promoted unity and advanced the mission.

The mission to the Gentiles now had the clear and unified support of the church leadership in Jerusalem. Paul and his companions could continue their ministry without the burden of debating circumcision and law-keeping as they spread the message of the gospel throughout the Roman empire.



PASSAGE INSIGHT

THE JERUSALEM COUNCIL: A TURNING POINT IN CHURCH HISTORY

ACTS 15