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a *Grace Notes* course

# **The Acts of the Apostles**

an expositional study

by Warren Doud

Lesson 302: **Acts 15:15-29**

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# ACTS, Lesson 302, Acts 15:15-29

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**Acts 15:15-29****Acts 15:15**

**And to this agree the words of the prophets; as it is written,**

In verses 16 to 18, James quotes from the prophecy of Amos (Amos 9:11-12).

“Why did James choose this particular passage from Scripture to affirm his support for admitting Gentiles into the church? The prophets of the Old Testament agree with the message of Amos and, in effect, speak the same thing. Indeed, the Holy Spirit is speaking through them.”<sup>1</sup>

The text here in Acts is a free quotation, but it has few variations from that in Amos. “The Septuagint Greek translation comes close to the James’s quotation”,<sup>2</sup> so James probably quoted the Greek version.

All of the apostles and teachers made liberal use of the Old Testament scriptures, especially in teaching Jews.

**Acts 15:16**

**After this I will return, and will build again the tabernacle of David, which is fallen down; and I will build again the ruins thereof, and I will set it up:**

The main point of the quotation, as made by James, was to show that, according to the prophets, it was contemplated that the Gentiles should be introduced to the privileges of the children of God; and on this point the passage has a direct bearing.<sup>3</sup>

Compare **Acts 2:29 to 35**, where Peter, speaking to Jews on the day of Pentecost, spoke

of similar prophecies about the House of David being raised up as Jesus Christ was elevated.

**Acts 15:17**

**That the residue of men might seek after the Lord, and all the Gentiles, upon whom my name is called, says the Lord, who does all these things.**

This verse agrees very well with the Septuagint (Greek) version of Amos 9:12. The Hebrew text includes mention of the Edomites as part of the “residue of men”.

“The royal house of David is here represented as a tabernacle that had fallen into decay. It was weakened by the revolt of the ten tribes, and reduced by repeated disasters. God promises to restore it, and rebuild its ruins, so that the kingdom would again flourish as in the days of David and Solomon. The remnant of men that is, the Gentiles would become members of the theocracy. God’s name would be called upon them : they also, as well as the Israelites, would be His people.”<sup>4</sup>

Some commentators think that Amos’ prophecy was partially fulfilled when Zerubbabel restored the kingdom of Judea, when the Edomites were incorporated among the Jews. But the prophecy can only receive complete fulfillment when the Messiah returns in full power.

James, with good reason, applies this prophecy to existing circumstances. According to it, the Gentiles should be called into the church of God. On them as well as on the Jews the name of God was to be set ; and in the conversions of the Gentiles there was a fulfilment of the prediction. But in the prophecy there is no mention of circumcision, nor of the observance of the law of Moses; and therefore, seeing that the Gentiles had already become believers, it

<sup>1</sup> Calvin, Vol. II, page 46

<sup>2</sup> Baker

<sup>3</sup> Barnes

<sup>4</sup> Gloag, Acts 15:17,18

was not for the assembly to impose these burdens upon them.<sup>5</sup>

#### Acts 15:18

**Known unto God are all his works from the beginning of the world.**

James now points out that God's Plan was in existence for all time, from the foundations of the earth.

**Ephesians 3:8-11.** Unto me, who am less than the least of all saints, is this grace given, that I should preach among the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ;

And to make all men see what is the fellowship of the mystery, which from the beginning of the world hath been hid in God, who created all things by Jesus Christ:

To the intent that now unto the principalities and powers in heavenly places might be known by the church the manifold wisdom of God, According to the eternal purpose which he purposed in Christ Jesus our Lord:

#### Acts 15:19

**Wherefore my sentence is, that we trouble not them, which from among the Gentiles are turned to God:**

#### Wherefore my sentence is

This is *dio egw krinw*, "therefore my judgment is..." See the Grace Notes topic for a development of the meaning of this word.

TOPIC: JUDGMENT, JUSTICE, JUDGING

As the leader of the Christians in Jerusalem, James gives a concise opinion, "Do not trouble the Gentiles who are turning to God."

The key word "trouble" is from an ancient Greek term meaning "to annoy" or "to crowd in on". It would be very disconcerting to the Gentiles to have to submit to circumcision, and

keeping the Law, and it's an unnecessary burden that would be laid on them.

#### Acts 15:20

**But that we write unto them, that they abstain from pollutions of idols, and from fornication, and from things strangled, and from blood.**

Now verses 20 and 21 are extremely interesting, and valuable for modern Christians to understand. James was expounding the concept that the "Law of Love" supersedes the "Law of Liberty".

The Judaizers would not have been satisfied with this statement, but they might have felt slightly better that at least some commandment was given.

James wants all the Christians to live together in harmony, Jews and Gentiles, so he is setting these rules in order that Gentiles might avoid the worst offenses to Jewish sensitivities.

The Gentiles would have to agree that fornication should be forbidden; but they might have thought they have liberty in other areas. As Paul would write in Romans 14, however, Christians ought to avoid giving offense whenever possible, especially in the Romans context, of eating things that are offensive.

READ Romans 14

#### pollution of idols

Food was offered to idols in ancient times. Recall that Daniel and his friends refused to eat the "king's portion", meat which had been offered to idols. Jews compared meat sacrifice to idols to be equivalent to that which comes in contact with a dead body; the Jew ate no polluted meat.

READ the first part of Acts 10, to see Peter's dilemma about the same thing. God had to command him to eat (in his vision).

<sup>5</sup> ibid

**fornication**

Gentiles needed frequent reminders about sexual immorality. Gentile believers had been saved out of idolatry, and their (former) idol worship rituals included sexual activity as a part of the ceremonies. This was a very practical reminder about the standards of Christian living that would prove to be a great testimony to the unsaved population.

**things strangled**

Strangling an animal keeps the blood in the body, considered by some to add delicacy to a meat dish. But a Jew refuses to eat the blood, and thus the meat of an animal that has been strangled. Their meat animals must be properly butchered and the blood drained properly, otherwise it is defiled.

**and from blood.**

**Leviticus 17:13-16.** And whatsoever man there be of the children of Israel, or of the strangers that sojourn among you, which hunteth and catcheth any beast or fowl that may be eaten; he shall even pour out the blood thereof, and cover it with dust.

For it is the life of all flesh; the blood of it is for the life thereof: therefore I said unto the children of Israel, Ye shall eat the blood of no manner of flesh: for the life of all flesh is the blood thereof: whosoever eateth it shall be cut off.

And every soul that eateth that which died of itself, or that which was torn with beasts, whether it be one of your own country, or a stranger, he shall both wash his clothes, and bathe himself in water, and be unclean until the even: then shall he be clean.

But if he wash them not, nor bathe his flesh; then he shall bear his iniquity.

Following this rule helps give the Gentiles social acceptability among Jewish believers in the Christian community.

This phrase is though by a few commentators (e.g. Furneaux; Clarke) to refer to murder, or

bloodshed, and that those who relate this phrase to consumption of food are mistaken. However, the Leviticus passage above offers enough evidence that Jews found eating blood abhorrent, and that Gentiles would be wise to avoid it.

**Acts 15:21**

**For Moses of old time has in every city them that preach him, being read in the synagogues every Sabbath day.**

This statement explains why the Christian leaders are setting some guidelines for the behavior of believers who are living among unsaved Jews. It's an early example of the concept "The Law of Love Supersedes the Law of Liberty".

"The true meaning appears to be, that the Gentiles should abstain from these things, in order to avoid giving offence to the Jews ; for in every city the law is preached every Sabbath, and so these matters are brought prominently forward ; and thus, unless there be an abstinence from these particulars, the preaching of the law would perpetuate the offence of the Jewish to the Gentile Christians. In order then to maintain peace, let the Gentile Christians abstain from those actions which are regarded by the Jews as causing pollution."<sup>6</sup>

**READ 1 Corinthians 8:1-13**

In this passage (1 Corinthians 8) it is called "law of love." In effect this law says that because of my love for the weaker and often legalistic brethren, and in order to keep them from being highly critical or upset and disturbed, there are certain things which I have the liberty to do, yet I will refrain from doing them -- not because they are wrong in themselves, but because as a believer advanced in doctrine I want to help other believers rather than hinder them."<sup>7</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Gloag, Acts 15:21

<sup>7</sup> Thieme, "Doubtful Things in Corinth"

TOPIC: SEPARATION

### Acts 15:22

**Then it pleased the apostles and elders, with the whole church, to send chosen men of their own company to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas; namely, Judas surnamed Barsabas, and Silas, chief men among the brethren:**

### Then it pleased the apostles and elders

“It seemed good” The Greek **EDOXE** is used to express the formal resolution of a senate or assembly. The apostles were the original twelve then in Jerusalem. The elders were the presbyters of the church of Jerusalem.

Apparently a vote was taken. If the Judaizers voted against this, the majority were in favor. We can be sure that all the apostles and elders voiced their opinions before this agreement was taken.

### with the whole church

The church as a whole accepted the proposition by acclamation. James proceeded to take practical action.

### to send chosen men of their own company

The apostles and elders, along with the church, chose specific men to go with Paul and Barnabas to Antioch. Judas and Silas were chosen, probably to back up the testimony of Paul and Barnabas and strengthen the presentation of this extremely important letters the Jerusalem church sent.

### Judas surnamed Barsabas

A few commentators say that Judas Barsabas was the man who was mentioned in Acts 1 as a candidate for the apostle position that Matthias was voted into. However, that man’s name was Joseph, not Judas. Since they both had the same “last” name, Barsabas, which means “son of Barsaba”, perhaps they were brothers.

### Silas

Silas was known as Silas in the Acts, but in Paul’s epistles and in 1 Peter, he is called Silvanus He as a Roman citizen (see Acts 16:37), and probably a Hellenist.

Silas assisted Paul in Antioch in his evangelistic labors, and was also chosen by him to be his companion on his second missionary tour (Acts 16:19–24). He is referred to in the epistles under the name of Silvanus (2 Cor. 1:19; 1 Thess. 1:1; 2 Thess. 1:1; 1 Pet. 5:12). There is no record of the time or place of his death.<sup>8</sup>

### Acts 15:23

**And they wrote letters by them after this manner; The apostles and elders and brethren send greeting unto the brethren which are of the Gentiles in Antioch and Syria and Cilicia:**

The apostles and elders in Jerusalem, with the approval of the whole church, sent letters to their Christian brothers in Antioch, who were Gentiles. This is an extraordinary occasion, not only because of the gracious content of the letters carried by Paul, Barnabas, Judas, and Silas, but also because it represents so dynamically the growing together of Christian believers among the Jews and Gentiles.

### Syria

In the New Testament Gk. *Syria* refers to the Roman province of Syria (Luke 2:2), to the Syrian, Phoenician, and Palestinian coastline (Acts 18:18 [cf. v. 22]; 20:3 [cf. 21:2–3]), and to Palestine and the region in which Palestine, Phoenicia, and Syria bordered each other (Matt. 4:24). The province of Syria could also be called “Syria and Cilicia” (Acts 15:23, 41; Gal. 1:21).<sup>9</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Easton, M. (1996). Easton's Bible dictionary.

<sup>9</sup> Myers, A. C. (1987). *The Eerdmans Bible dictionary* (977).

**Cilicia**

A Jewish settlement at Cilicia (perhaps Paul's home; Acts 21:39; 22:3) sent supporters to the synagogue at Jerusalem (Acts 6:9). Gentile Christians were in the same district (15:23), and may have learned about Paul's teachings from converts in the adjacent province of Galatia. At any rate, Paul visited Cilicia at the beginning of his second missionary journey (15:41), crossing the Taurus in June. At an earlier date before his first missionary journey the apostle also had returned to his native Tarsus (Gal. 1:21, which may refer to Acts 9:30).<sup>10</sup>

**Acts 15:24**

**Forasmuch as we have heard, that certain which went out from us have troubled you with words, subverting your souls, saying, You must be circumcised, and keep the law: to whom we gave no such commandment:**

**Certain which went out from us**

This is a direct reference to the Judaizers, put in very tactful language.

**have troubled you with words**

"Troubled" is the aorist tense of a common verb, **tarasso**, which means "to agitate; to make the heart palpitate", along with the instrumental case of **logois**. The words of the Judaizers have caused agitation among the brethren in Antioch.

**subverting your souls**

This phrase comes from an older Greek construction of the verb **anaskeuadzo**, which means "to plunder; to ravage; to subvert; to destroy". The effect of the false doctrine is to destroy the souls of Christians. Note Paul's instructions to Titus:

<sup>10</sup> Myers, A. C. (1987). *The Eerdmans Bible dictionary* (217).

**Titus 1:9-11.** Holding fast the faithful word as he hath been taught, that he may be able by sound doctrine both to exhort and to convince the gainsayers.

For there are many unruly and vain talkers and deceivers, specially they of the circumcision:

Whose mouths must be stopped, who subvert whole houses, teaching things which they ought not, for filthy lucre's sake.

**You must be circumcised, and keep the law**

The Judaizers mean to bring the Gentile Christians into full compliance with the Law of Moses, beginning with circumcision. But they would expect all believers to fully integrate into Jewish traditions, including rigorous Sabbath keeping, strict adherence to social customs, and complete observance of all religious practice.

**to whom we gave no such commandment**

This is a flat disclaimer of the whole conduct of the Judaizers in Antioch and in Jerusalem, a complete repudiation of their effort to impose the Mosaic ceremonial law upon the Gentile Christians.<sup>11</sup>

Although the change in Jewish believers' thinking, from legal Judaism to full understanding of grace, took place over several decades, this one phrase in the New Testament well represents the full movement of believers into a spiritual life of grace and liberty.

**Romans 8:16-21.** The Spirit Himself testifies with our spirit that we are children of God,

and if children, heirs also, heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, if indeed we suffer with *Him* so that we may also be glorified with *Him*.

<sup>11</sup> Robertson, A. (1997). *Word Pictures in the New Testament* (Acts 15:24).

For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that is to be revealed to us.

For the anxious longing of the creation waits eagerly for the revealing of the sons of God.

For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of Him who subjected it, in hope

that the creation itself also will be set free from its slavery to corruption into the freedom of the glory of the children of God.

#### Acts 15:25

**It seemed good unto us, being assembled with one accord, to send chosen men unto you with our beloved Barnabas and Paul,**

#### Being assembled with one accord

The church in Jerusalem was of one mind in this matter. It seems that in Jerusalem, at least, the Judaizers had been persuaded of the wisdom of the decision which was taken. Robertson speaks of the Judaizers as “defeated disturbers”<sup>12</sup>, but it’s quite possible that many of them, as spirit-filled believers, were able to understand truth and accept it. The Judaizers were Christians and could have been adamant in their refusal to give up their Jewish practices; but they seem to be in agreement for now.

On the subject of unity among believers, see Ephesians 4:11-16.

#### Acts 15:26

**Men that have hazarded their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.**

Certainly Barnabas and Paul took extreme risks in their evangelistic mission to Asia. See Acts 13:50; 14:19. There is no information about what experience Judas and Silas might have had prior to this time, but they surely had

<sup>12</sup> *ibid*, Acts 15:25

experienced the general risks of the great persecution.

#### Acts 15:27

**We have sent therefore Judas and Silas, who shall also tell you the same things by mouth.**

Judas and Silas were specifically endorsed to give verbal witness that the letters were genuine, that they had witnessed the same things that the letters spoke of. If there was to be any question of the accuracy of the testimony of Paul and Barnabas, they could provide corroboration.

#### Acts 15:28

**For it seemed good to the Holy Spirit, and to us, to lay upon you no greater burden than these necessary things;**

**“For it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us not to burden you with more than these essentials” NASB**

The leaders of the Jerusalem church were fully aware that they were under the influence and direction of the Holy Spirit in this matter.

#### necessary things

“Abstinence from the things mentioned in the letter was though necessary to promote the free converse between the Jewish and Gentile Christians, and especially to secure communion among them at the Lord’s table.”<sup>13</sup>

These were not things that were necessary for salvation, but to secure the peace of the church at the present time. They hoped that the Antioch believers would not refuse these instructions; they were extra burdens, to be sure, but there were not many of them, and they weren’t heavy. What the leadership did was to prevent other much greater burdens from being laid on the Gentiles.

<sup>13</sup> Gloag, Acts 15:28

**Acts 15:29**

**That you abstain from meats offered to idols, and from blood, and from things strangled, and from fornication: from which if you keep yourselves, you shall do well. Fare you well.**

[See the discussion above in Acts 15:20, 21 regarding these four regulations.]

The peace and concord in the fellowship of Jews and Gentiles will justify any slight concession on the part of the Gentiles. This letter is not laid down as a law, but it is the judgment of the Jerusalem Christians for the guidance of the Gentiles (16:4) and it had a fine effect at once (15:30–35). Trouble did come later from the Judaizers who were really hostile to the agreement in Jerusalem, but that opposition in no way discredits the worth of the work of this Conference. No sane agreement will silence perpetual and professional disturbers like these Judaizers who will seek to unsettle Paul's work in Antioch, in Corinth, in Galatia, in Jerusalem, in Rome.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Robertson, A. (1997). *Word Pictures in the New Testament* (Acts 15:29).

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## Separation

The Christian's main goals in life should be occupation with the Lord Jesus Christ, conformity to His image, and fulfilling the Plan of God for his life. The believer must make careful decisions about his purpose in life. Then, he must compare every activity in his life with his goals to see whether the activity helps or hinders him in reaching the goals.

The following notes provide examples of the uses of the word **aphoridzo** (separation) in the Bible:

Matt. 13:49-51, the wicked are separated from the righteous at the final judgment.

Matt. 25:31-46, the sheep are separated from the goats.

Are you one of the righteous? How do you know? Can you explain to a friend how he can be one of the sheep instead of one of the goats?

Luke. 6:22, the righteous man is ostracized by the worldly.

Acts 13:2, Barnabas and Saul (Paul) were separated to the work of the ministry.

2 Cor. 6:17, "touch not the unclean thing."

Gal. 1:15, Paul separated from his mother's womb.

Gal. 2:12, Peter wrongfully separated himself from Gentiles for fear of the opinion of the Jews.

The ability to stand alone for that which is right is one of the truest signs of maturity in the Christian life. It is the sign that one has openly identified himself with a superior way of life - with the person of the Lord Jesus Christ.

When a person takes a stand, he is saying to others that he has something worth standing for. This type of commitment attracts followers and is one of the primary characteristics of a good leader.

One of the strongest pressures against being true to the Word of God comes from friends who have compromised their own standards or who have rejected Christ's standards in some

way. The most serious consequence of not taking a stand is that the Word of God is not upheld by the believer's testimony. The Bible has a great deal to say about the believer's obligation to separate from people who knowingly and willfully disobey the Lord.

### Separate yourself from those who are doctrinally disorderly.

**1 Tim. 6:3-5.** "If any man teach otherwise, and consent not to wholesome words, even the words of our Lord Jesus Christ, and to the doctrine which is according to godliness: He is proud, knowing nothing, but doting about questions and strifes of words, whereof cometh envy, strife, railings, evil surmisings, Perverse disputings of men of corrupt minds, and destitute of the truth, supposing that gain is godliness; from such withdraw thyself."

**2 Tim 3:1-5.** "This know also, that in the last days perilous times shall come. For men shall be lovers of their own selves, covetous, boasters, proud, blasphemers, disobedient to parents, unthankful, unholy, Without natural affection, truce breakers, false accusers, incontinent, fierce, despisers of those that are good, traitors, heady, high-minded, lovers of pleasures more than lovers of God; Having a form of godliness, but denying the power thereof: from such turn away."

### Avoid those who cause divisions and offense.

**Romans 16:17,18.** "Now I beseech you brethren, mark them which cause divisions and offences contrary to the doctrine which ye have learned; and avoid them. For they that are such serve not our Lord Jesus Christ, but their own belly; and by good words and fair speeches deceive the hearts of the simple."

### Separate from the world.

**John 15:19** "If ye were of the world, the world would love his own: but because ye

are not of the world, but I have chosen you out of the world, therefore the world hateth you."

### Separate from the works of darkness.

**Eph. 5:11,12** "And have no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness, but rather reprove them. For it is a shame even to speak of those things which are done of them in secret."

### Separate from Christians walking disorderly.

**2 Thess. 3:6** "Now we command you, brethren, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that ye withdraw yourselves from every brother that walketh disorderly, and not after the tradition which he received of us."

### Those who would not repent were excommunicated.

**Matt. 18:15-17** "Moreover if thy brother shall trespass against thee, go and tell him his fault between thee and him alone: if he shall hear thee, thou hast gained thy brother. But if he will not hear thee, then take with thee one or two more, that in the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established. And if he shall neglect to hear them, tell it unto the church: but if he neglect to hear the church, let him be unto thee as an heathen man and a publican."

**Titus 3:9-11** "But avoid foolish questions, and genealogies, and contentions, and strivings about the law; for they are unprofitable and vain. A man that is an heretic after the first and second admonition reject; Knowing that he that is such is subverted, and sinneth, being condemned of himself."

### Separate from false teachers.

**2 John v. 10** "If there come any unto you, and bring not this doctrine, receive him not

into your house, neither bid him God speed:"

**Col. 2:8** "Beware lest any man spoil you through philosophy and vain deceit, after the tradition of men, after the rudiments of the world, and not after Christ."

**Prov. 19:27** "Cease, my son, to hear the instruction that causeth to err from the words of knowledge."

**Prov. 14:6-8** "A scorner seeketh wisdom, and findeth it not: but knowledge is easy unto him that understandeth. Go from the presence of a foolish man, when thou perceivest not in him the lips of knowledge. The wisdom of the prudent is to understand his way: but the folly of fools is deceit."

**Psalms 1:1.** "Blessed is the man that walketh not in the counsel of the ungodly, nor standeth in the way of sinners, nor sitteth in the seat of the scornful. But his delight is in the law of the Lord; and in his law doth he meditate day and night."

### Separate from the sinful activities of the unbeliever.

**1 Cor. 5:9-11**

**1 Kings 11:12**

**2 Cor. 6:14**

**2 Chron. 19:2**

**Heb. 13:13**

**Ex. 34:12**

**1 Pet. 4:1-5**

**Prov. 1:10-19; 4:14; 24:1**

**Num. 33:55**