

## **The Right Answer to a Crucial Question**

### **Acts 15:1-35**

In Acts 15 the early church faces a critical decision. Surprisingly, it handles it by calling a council to decide the issue.

#### **One Crucial Question**

Beginning with the conversion of the Roman centurion Cornelius, large numbers of Gentiles have been responding to the gospel. The mission to the Gentiles is in full flow. This troubled conservative Jewish Christians, who said that faith in Jesus was not enough. Gentiles had to be circumcised and obey the Law of Moses to be saved.

The question at the heart of the debate was: 'how can a person be saved?' But what does it mean to be 'saved'? In his letter to the Galatians, Paul uses the word 'justified' instead of the word 'saved': how can we be declared 'not guilty' before God? How can we be declared righteous before him?

This question matters, because we want to know that what we are trusting in to save us, really does save us!

#### **The Answer We All Need**

The Jewish teachers who were causing this trouble were good people. Which just goes to show that you can be good and moral and religious and still be wrong!

Circumcision was a sign that you were a member of God's people. The Law of Moses told you how you had to live to make yourself acceptable to God. So it is understandable that these people thought Gentiles needed to be circumcised and keep the Law to be saved. In fact, thinking that we can save ourselves by doing the right things can be appealing to us. But the apostles Barnabas and Paul did not agree, and went to Jerusalem to discuss the issue in depth.

At the Jerusalem council Peter reminded them how God had started the mission to the Gentiles, and that the Law only showed them how far from God they were and how much they needed his grace. He said that both Jews and Gentiles are saved by faith in Jesus' grace. James agreed, and showed from the Old Testament prophets that the Gentiles coming to faith was foretold by the prophets.

So everyone agreed that both Jews and Gentiles are saved by grace, through faith. But then they add 4 things the Gentiles should not do. Why do they do this, and why do the Gentiles respond to the letter with such joy?

#### **The Joy that Follows**

The reason James gave for his 4 prohibitions was that the Law of Moses is read in every city. Jewish Christians were shaped by this law. To preserve fellowship with them, the Gentile Christians would need to let go of some of their freedoms. They rejoiced to do this. When you know Jesus has been gracious to you and put his freedom aside to save you, you will rejoice to do the same for your brothers and sisters. When you're a grace receiver, you can be a grace giver.

But they also rejoiced because they knew they were saved by grace, that they were accepted by God. And knowing that brings great joy.