

STUDY 2 || *ACTS 15:1-35 & GALATIANS*

# GOSPEL FREEDOM

Last week we saw that fulfilling our gospel mission will involve significant hardship. But this week we'll see, sometimes people can make it much more difficult than it needs to be..

Think of something you had to do that was much more onerous than it needed to be. Maybe applying for a particular job, funding from Centrelink, getting a refund on something, making an insurance claim. What happened? How did it make you feel?

FREE



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## THE DEBATE

Paul's mission to the Gentiles was going well, but here it hits a snag...

**Read Acts 15:1-5**

1. What's the key issue on the line? (v1,5)

Who's on each side of the debate and why do you think it's so important to them?

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## THREE LINES OF EVIDENCE

**Follow the debate in Jerusalem by reading Acts 15:6-18.**

2. What does Peter say is the basis for *Jews* to be saved? (v10-11)

What implication does this have for the way *Gentiles* (i.e. non-Jews) are saved?

3. Throughout Acts there have been lots of miraculous 'fireworks' whenever a new people group comes to hear and believe the gospel for the first time (e.g. 8:14-17, 10:44-48). What do these previous 'fireworks' prove about Gentiles in the current debate? (v7-8,12)

Given that special function of the miraculous 'fireworks', should we expect similar things every time someone becomes a Christian? Why or why not?

4. James closes the debate. What's the ultimate evidence he provides? (v15-18)

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## THE DECISION

To hear the final decision from James, read Acts 15:19-35.

- The gist of the decree is that the Gentiles do not need to be circumcised and keep the law of Moses. They just need to stay clear of anything associated with pagan idolatry, to show the Jews they have indeed left their old gods behind, without the need for the law (*see sidebar for more*). Why would this be so encouraging (v31) to Gentile believers?

What would have happened if the decision had been different? (v10,19,28)

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## STRATEGIC MEMO

While Paul was taking the gospel around the known world, he obviously couldn't be everywhere at once. As we've seen from Acts already, he often had to leave behind churches he had recently planted so as to reach even more people with the gospel. As a result, he often had to address the problems those churches faced by *letter*, because he couldn't be there in person. As we'll see in this series, starting this week, the resulting letters often tie in closely with the situation in Acts. In fact they often crystallise the issues in a way that helps us apply the principles we see in Acts to ourselves...

Read Galatians 5:1-6, written in the lead up to the Jerusalem council of Acts 15.

- What connections can you see between this passage and Acts 15?

If it's not circumcision and the law which matter, what does? (v6)

### *A Baffling Decree?*

The decree from James (Acts 15:20) has baffled many interpreters, mostly because the four things prohibited don't seem to be all the same kind of thing. While sexual immorality is unacceptable for any follower of Jesus (e.g. 1Cor 6:9-20), the ban on pollutions by idols, strangled animals and blood sounds more like parts of the law of Moses, the law of Moses which even Jews couldn't keep and so certainly Gentiles shouldn't be told to keep either (Acts 15:10)! It makes it confusing why *these* four rules were given. However, knowing what would happen in idol-worship feasts at the local temple makes it a bit clearer. At some temple feasts (the kind you find described in 1 Cor 10) an animal would be slowly strangled so its life force could pass to the idol, the participants would drink some of its blood to join themselves with the idol, then they'd cook and feast on the sacrificed animal, after which they'd engage temple prostitutes. When we understand this background, it seems James is saying something like this: 'Gentile Christians, we certainly don't want to impose on you any of the law that we Jews could never keep ourselves. We just want to remind you to make *double sure you stay right away from your old pagan worship*. Don't think you can ever again tinker with even one of its aspects!' This makes sense in the context of the debate: some Jewish Christians are saying Gentile Christians need the law of Moses to live right. If Gentile Christians are not going to have the law imposed on them, they'd better show the Jews who love the law (Acts 15:21) that having hearts purified by the Spirit (Acts 15:8-9) is enough to keep them from idolatry.

7. We may not want to impose the law of Moses on people. But we may still have other unnecessary expectations for others which could be a “burden” or “yoke”, “making it difficult for them to turn to God.” Think through the following areas. Do we unwittingly have expectations of a “proper Christian” in these areas, beyond “faith expressing itself through love”?
  - Standard of dress
  - Family stability
  - Personal hygiene
  - Level of education
  - Employment status
  - Political leanings
  - Social skills
  - Speaking your language well
  
8. What effects could these extra expectations have on other people?
  
  
  
  
  
9. Where we do have these extra expectations (and we probably all do!), how can Acts 15 and Galatians 5 help us let go of them?

If we’re a church on gospel mission, we’ll need to give people freedom to be *simply Christian*, trusting Jesus for the forgiveness of their sins, showing that trust in the way they love God and others. Not obligated to keep the law of Moses. Not obligated to dress like us, or smell like us, or be employed like us, or vote like us. No other obligations at all. Acts and Galatians shows it won’t be easy. It’s so natural to develop extra expectations that sometimes we don’t even know we’re doing it! But Acts and Galatians also show that giving each other the freedom to just lovingly trust Jesus *can be done*. For the sake of the gospel let’s pray that we can do it too.