

# Empowered

The Amazing Church of Jesus Christ

## Week 7

The Jerusalem Council and  
the Church in Macedonia

**Acts 15:1 – 16:40**

Teacher Notes

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*Bible versions used throughout the Empowered teacher notes are  
NASB, ESV, NLT, and CEB.*

## ✂ Introduction to Week Seven

**ILLUSTRATION:** Home improvement is the rage these days. We readily have access to experts on television and YouTube assuring us that we can ‘do it yourself!’ Have you ever tried to wallpaper? One tool is critical for this type of project; without it, you are doomed to failure. It is the plumbline. This simple tool gives an exact straight line—it will not vary—it always and only hangs in a straight line. There are nightmarish tales of people aligning a strip of paper a ‘little off’ the plumbline, thinking ‘good enough’ works, only to find their wallpaper hanging at an odd angle in two more strips!! ‘Good enough’ leads to being off plumb, out of alignment.

⇒ **God’s Word is the believer’s plumbline. Every word, teaching, thought should line up exactly to what Jesus, the Word, has said. If we add to it or subtract from it, we will ultimately drift from the truth. Just being a little ‘off’ from God’s Word can lead us to stumble in our walk with Him and cause others to stumble as well.**

- How grateful we should be toward the men and women who were compelled to translate the Word of God into English. One such man was John Wycliffe. He was—
  - ~ An English theologian and philosopher.
  - ~ He was a church reformer and promoted the first complete translation of the Bible from Latin to English. He began this project in 1381.
  - ~ John Wycliffe believed that every Christian should have access to scripture.
  - ~ He shared his heartbeat regarding the importance of knowing God’s Word—*“All Christian life is to be measured by Scripture; by every word thereof.”*
- ⇒ **God’s Word should be a Christian’s plumbline for living!**
- This week we will be looking at Acts 15 and 16. As we begin in Acts 15, the central story surrounds sound doctrine as it speaks to salvation.
- How does the Word of God, not man, respond to the critical question: “What must a man do to be saved?”
- ⇒ **There are no sufficient adjectives to express the weight, the importance of what occurred at the Jerusalem Council when they answered the question, “What must a man do to be saved?” They responded by applying God’s Word to the question. As a result, the early Christian church was built plumbed to God’s Word.**

### Study One:

#### **Acts 15:1-12      The Decision on Doctrine**

- In Acts 15, we find Paul and Barnabas leading a thriving group of believers in Antioch.
  - ~ A church essentially consisted of Gentile believers.

~ A church filled with people who had been set free from their bondage to sin and its destructive lifestyle.

- A group of men from Judea entered the scene and began teaching, “...Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.” (Acts 15:1)

⇒ **Their teaching: Circumcision was a requirement for salvation.**

- Who were these men?

~ Legalistic Jewish teachers (also known as Judaizers) who preferred a legalistic religion to one based on faith.

~ They did not deny salvation by grace ... they just gave EQUAL weight to following the Old Covenant and the Law ... for true, complete salvation.

**TEACHING TIP:** The teaching of these men with its caveat of ‘works’ brought into question— Was Jesus’s work on the cross ‘enough?’

⇒ **The essence of their teaching: God’s Grace PLUS Human Works = Salvation**

- What these men preached was in direct opposition to the teaching of Paul and Barnabas; so, they vehemently argued with these men. (Acts 15:2)

**TEACHING TIP:** Why would such teaching even arise in the early church? Because two distinctly different groups of people were now uniting as one in Christ.

1. The Jews: who came from a very legalistic mindset (the Law with its specific rules/rituals).
2. The Gentiles: who came from a very licentious mindset and lifestyle of idolatry.

→ **NOTE:** What seemed to undergird their *human caveat* regarding salvation?

1. Their tradition: this is what we have done to ‘set us apart’ and it still needs to be done.
2. Their moral standard—the Law.
  - \* Perhaps they feared that the Gentile Christians would weaken the faith, since they were coming out of idolatry.
  - \* Or perhaps they thought— “We have a standard and you don’t, so it’s now a requirement to follow ours.”

⇒ **THE PROBLEM: Mixing human works with grace invalidates, nullifies, grace!**

▲ **QUOTE:** In his commentary on Acts, *Be Daring*, Warren Wiersbe states— “They were stitching up the rent veil (Luke 23:45) and blocking the new and living way to God that Jesus had opened when He died on the cross (Hebrews 10:19-25) ... They were saying, ‘A Gentile must first become a Jew before he can become a Christian! It is not sufficient for them simply to trust Jesus Christ. They must also obey Moses!’”

**APPLICATION:** Is this type of man or woman still around today saying that you are saved by grace AND fill in the blank? Absolutely! Usually the 'fill in the blank' deals with a denominational tradition or ritual.

⇒ **The moment someone thinks salvation is based on 'grace plus works'— 'works' that they will define for you—they have essentially gone off plumb, no matter how good their intentions may be.**

▪ Paul and Barnabas realized this false teaching would ultimately divide the church, its unity. They also recognized that the matter was too important to be just a local decision, so the church sent Paul, Barnabas, and other trustworthy men to the church at Jerusalem where a determination could be made by the apostles and elders.

▪ In Acts 15:4, they arrived in Jerusalem and shared what was happening on the mission field, especially with the Gentiles!!

▪ The report was certainly good news to hear, but some Jewish believers strongly felt that the Gentile believers were obligated to abide by the Law and Old Covenant rituals— “... *It is necessary to circumcise them and to direct them to observe the Law of Moses.*”

▪ The apostles and elders came together to resolve this issue; much debate ensued.

▪ Peter listened to the debate, then laid out his response in five key points. (Acts 15:7-11)

1. **This was God’s decision**—it was God Who had made the choice that Gentiles hear the Word and believe. (Acts 15:7)

⇒ **No one had a right to require of the Gentiles what God had not required.**

2. **This was God’s work**—God gave the Gentile believers the Holy Spirit, just as He did the Jews ... including those listening to him at that very moment. (Acts 15:8)

⇒ **The Holy Spirit is a gift from God given only to the redeemed.**

**TEACHING TIP:** These Jewish believers were not saying that these things were required for salvation, but it seemed they thought Gentiles must live like Jews after their salvation, living under the Old Covenant and the Law.

**TEACHING TIP:** Peter had a God ordained meeting with Cornelius and witnessed his conversion, along with other Gentiles. No Law, no circumcision—only God at work.

**TEACHING TIP:** Faith is a matter of the heart, which only God can see.

3. **This was God’s love for the whole world in action**—God made no distinction between Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians. (Acts 15:9)

⇒ **The issue of sin had been dealt with—justification granted.**

4. **This was God’s way**—it was not their place to challenge or question God’s gospel of grace with the addition of the Law. (Acts 15:10)

⇒ **Not one of the Jewish believers standing before him had been saved by the Law or their sins purified by the Law or their receiving the Holy Spirit by the Law.**

**TEACHING TIP:** Both Jews’ and Gentiles’ hearts had been cleansed—what more could the Law and rituals add?

**TEACHING TIP:** How foolish to impose on the Gentiles what had not worked for the Jews!

**TEACHING TIP:** What was the purpose of the Law? Paul tells us in Galatians 3:24 that it was given as a tutor, a guide—to define sin—so that people would see their need to repent and return to God.

5. **What must a person do to be saved?** —Peter with total clarity answered this question, *“But we believe that we are saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, in the same way as they also are.”* (Acts 15:11)

**TEACHING TIP:** This is God’s plumbline!

⇒ **This is the way of salvation – faith in Christ and Christ alone ... Jew or Gentile.**

→ **NOTE:** Peter had heard Jesus teach that He was the ONE (and only) way ... whether Jew or Gentile. There has always been and will always be only ONE WAY to the Father, to heaven.

- Peter’s words were met with silence ... no one could contradict them!!
- In Acts 15:12 Paul and Barnabas spoke as witnesses. They testified to the miraculous signs and wonders God had done through them among the Gentiles.

*“For by grace you have been saved through faith; and this is not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one may boast.”*  
(Ephesians 2:8-9)

## Study Two:

### **Acts 15:13-29      The Letter from Jerusalem to Antioch**

- After the compelling testimonies from Peter, Paul, and Barnabas, James, the Lord’s brother and the leader of the church in Jerusalem, stood up to respond to what he had heard—*“Simeon has related how God first concerned Himself about taking from among the Gentiles*

a people for His name. **With this the words of the Prophets agree, just as it is written ..."**  
(Acts 15:14-15)

- James turned to God's Word. His evaluation would be based on God's Word. He cited the prophet Amos which supported Peter's points. We will focus on vv16-18—"After these things I will return and I will rebuild the tabernacle of David which has fallen, and I will rebuild its ruins, and I will restore it, **so that the rest of mankind may seek the Lord, and all the Gentiles who are called by My name,**' says the Lord Who makes these things known from long ago."

- James made two points from Amos 9:11-12:

1. God's Word through Amos confirmed that Gentiles would be saved as Gentiles, without first becoming Jews. No mention of their conforming to the rites of the Jewish people.
2. God's Word also confirmed that all the things that He was doing in the church and in the world were all foreknown by Him. From eternity past God had planned for the Gentiles to be brought into His church.

**TEACHING TIP:** Do you see that James plumbed his response to God's Word?

- James then made his determination—"Therefore it is my judgment that we do not trouble those who are turning to God from among the Gentiles." (Acts 15:19)
- James wrote down his determination in a letter that was taken by Paul, Barnabas, and the others from Antioch, along with Judas and Silas from Jerusalem who acted as witnesses to the veracity of it. (Acts 15:22-23)
- James' letter was practical. Two points were made specifically to stop any division developing within the church between the Jewish and Gentile believers:
  - A. We are all under God's grace so do not add requirements or conditions for salvation.
    - \* Keeping the law and observing rituals were not requirements or conditions for salvation.

→ **NOTE:** This point was directed to the Jewish believers. They were not to impose the above on their Gentile brothers.

- B. Because we are God's unfailing grace, be willing to limit your personal actions (what you may feel free to do) for the sake and love for others. Three specific directives were given:
  1. Stay away from anything that has to do with idols because there is only one true God. Both groups would have agreed on this point.
  2. Avoid fornication in all cases. (This spoke to the culture from which the Gentile believers came.) All would now agree on this point.
  3. Do not partake of meat that has been strangled or has blood in it.

→ **NOTE:** This third point was directed to the Gentiles who had no issues with dietary restrictions, but their Jewish brothers and sisters did. This was a mandate that called them to limit themselves out of respect and love for their Jewish brothers.

**TEACHING TIP:** Isn't the third directive from James the essence of being willing to 'deny oneself'—thinking of others first in the family of God?

*"For if because of food your brother or sister is hurt, you are no longer walking in accordance with love. Do not destroy with your choice of food that person for whom Christ died. Therefore do not let what is for you a good thing be spoken of as evil; for the kingdom of God is not eating and drinking, but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit." (Romans 14:15-17)*

- Hard to imagine the relief and absolute joy the Gentile believers in Antioch experienced as James' letter was read. Amazing grace had won!
- Paul and Barnabas returned to teaching and preaching – and began planning their next missionary journey.

## Study Three:

### **Acts 15:30-16:5    A Sharp Disagreement**

- Paul and Barnabas were friends who served the Lord together. They had just helped bring unity to the church, but we find them in a heated, personal disagreement about who would accompany them on their next missionary trip.
  - ~ Barnabas wanted his cousin Mark to go with them; Paul didn't. The more they spoke on this issue, the angrier each man got.

**TEACHING TIP:** God uses imperfect 'real' people with clay feet to accomplish His work—being a good person does not equate to being perfect.

**TEACHING TIP:** What was the issue concerning Mark?

- ~ He had served with them before (Acts 13) but did not complete the journey. Scripture does not tell us why he left them.
- ~ 'Why' didn't seem to matter to Paul. He considered Mark's action as 'desertion,' so to Paul, Mark was not trustworthy or dependable—he was a quitter.

- It ended without reaching a compromise. Their differences regarding Mark were too sharply apart. Instead, they appeared to agree to disagree; and two trips were planned and taken.
  - ~ Barnabas took Mark and sailed to Cyprus.
  - ~ Paul took Silas.

**TEACHING TIP:** Paul and Barnabas never served together again. Paul and Mark did, however, reconcile. (2 Timothy)

⇒ **God multiplied through division ... now there were two groups, instead of one, carrying out His mission to 'go'!!**

- Paul and Silas traveled from the east and arrived in Lystra—there they met Timothy.

**ILLUSTRATION:** Have you ever watched stone masons at work on building a patio? Their ability to use a chisel (not an electric tool or saw) is incredible. They chip away at a stone to a perfect 90-degree angle, then chip another to fit seamlessly into the stone it adjoins. The result is a thing not only of beauty, but of something useful to serve a specific purpose.

What does this have to do with the early church?! In Acts 16 we meet Timothy, Lydia, a demon-possessed woman, and an unnamed jailer—each impacted by Jesus and His church. Consider Peter's words in 1 Peter 2:5— "*... you also, as living stones, are being built up as a spiritual house.*"

Each of these "living stones" would have their own Jesus story, coming from completely different backgrounds (ethnic, cultural, social, economic). They would be chiseled and shaped to join in unity for the sharing of the gospel. The mortar? The Holy Spirit—using God's Word, their faith and love for Jesus for the mission!

- Paul chose Timothy to join his new team.

**TEACHING TIP:** A quick background on Timothy—

- ~ Son of a mother who was a Jewish believer and a father who was Greek and who seemed to be an unbelieving Gentile.
- ~ His mother and grandmother laid the groundwork for his faith. (2 Timothy)
- ~ He had a good reputation among the believers in the local church.
- ~ He was the first 'second generation' believer mentioned in the Bible.

- Before they set out Paul wanted Timothy to be circumcised. (Act 16:3)

✚ Acts 16:3 "*Paul wanted this man to leave with him; and he took him and circumcised him because of the Jews who were in those parts, for they all knew that his father was a Greek.*"

→ **NOTE:** As half Jew, Timothy would not have been required to be circumcised.

**TEACHING TIP:** At first glance, this seems somewhat odd, given the controversy over circumcision in the church at Antioch. Why would Paul require this of Timothy?

- ~ It was not for Timothy's salvation; but for the unbelieving Jews to whom he would minister.
- ~ Being uncircumcised, given he was half-Jew, would have been a continual offensive issue for the Jews he would seek to serve. It would have been a stumbling block.

**NOTE:** Paul did not ask this of Titus who also served with him. Why? Titus was pure Greek, so the principle of Gentile liberty was at stake.

- Timothy voluntarily removed this stumbling block and headed out with Paul and Silas.



## Study Four:

### **Acts 16:6-21      The Call to Macedonia**

- Paul visited the churches and instructed them to follow the decisions made by the apostles and elders in Jerusalem. They saw how the churches were increasing in number daily.
- In Acts 16:6-9 the Holy Spirit stepped in to direct or redirect Paul's travel plans.
  - ~ Paul was ready to move into new territory. He wanted to go to Asia Minor and Bithynia.
  - ~ This was not God's plans.
- In Acts 6:9 God gave His plan in a vision—a man of Macedonia appealing to Paul, *"Come over to Macedonia and help us."*

⇒ **God wanted Paul to go to Macedonia ... so Paul headed there ... immediately (v10) ... he didn't question or present his ideas ... he obeyed!**

**QUOTE:** George MacDonald, a Scottish author and preacher—  
*"Doing the will of God leaves me no time for disputing His plans."*

- At this point Luke joined Paul's group in Troas and from there they headed to Neapolis, the port of Philippi – about 150 miles distance.

**TEACHING TIP:** Philippi was a Roman colony, a military outpost with a large population of retired Roman citizens, especially from the military. It was a town that was loyal to Rome's laws and customs. It was not a hub of Judaism, so no synagogue existed in the city.

- Since there was no synagogue, Paul and his men headed down to the riverside, which was outside of the city. There he found a group of women meeting for prayer and worship—and Paul shared Jesus with them.
- One of the women in attendance was Lydia.
  - ~ A successful businesswoman – merchant of expensive purple cloth.
  - ~ God brought her all the way from Greece so that she might hear the Gospel!
  - ~ She was a Gentile who worshipped with these Jewish women.
  - ~ She worshipped God with the knowledge that she had.
- She listened to Paul's words and— *"...the Lord opened her heart to respond to the things spoken by Paul."* (Acts 16:14b)

⇒ **God opened the door of opportunity to Paul, and He opened Lydia's heart to receive the Good News of Jesus Christ!**

- Paul and his men lived at Lydia's house and went to prayer meetings with her.
- On their way to prayer meetings, a slave girl who had a spirit of divination followed them day after day.

**TEACHING TIP:** A "spirit of divination" literally meant 'a python spirit.' This was an expression from Greek mythology.

~ This girl was basically a medium who was in contact with demons who could supposedly predict the future.

- As she followed Paul and his companions, she would shout, *“These men are bond-servants of the Most High God, who are proclaiming to you a way of salvation.”* (Acts 16:17)

→ **NOTE:** The content of her words was true, but they were spoken by a girl controlled and possessed by a ‘snake,’ a demon. So, instead of a tone of praise and worship, she was ridiculing and mocking Paul and the others.

- Paul became exasperated with her and commanded the spirit that controlled her to come out of her by the authority of Jesus Christ.

~ And the demon instantly left her and was silenced!

- Being set free from a demon was great news for the slave girl, but bad news for her owners. Their bottom-line profits had just been negatively impacted.
- They grabbed Paul and Silas and brought them into the Forum. With what complaint? *“They cured a demon possessed young woman?”* NO, they invented a charge!

**TEACHING TIP:** The callousness of these men, these owners, is magnified in the fact that they were not in the least bit happy for this young woman. Nor were they amazed by the divine power that had just been manifested.

† Acts 16:20-21 *“... and when they had brought them to the chief magistrates, they said, “These men are throwing our city into confusion, being Jews, and are proclaiming customs which it is not lawful for us to accept or to observe, being Romans.”*

~ At this point, they did not know that both Paul and Silas were Roman citizens.

~ They are disturbing the peace! (No, they weren’t. They were headed to a prayer meeting.)

~ They are teaching a religion not authorized by Roman laws.

→ **NOTE:** In the case of these owners of the slave-girl, it was profit, not religion, that stoked their anger, but they used Paul’s faith to secure his jail time!!

- The end result: Paul and Silas were beaten and thrown into jail. This is where we meet our final “living stone.”

## Study Five:

### **Acts 16:22-40      A Jailer Becomes Justified**

- It does not take a lot of imagination to determine that a Roman jailer would not have a lot of sympathy, if any interest at all, in his two new prisoners, much less about WHOM they preached. All he saw were two beaten men.

- He added to their pain by putting them into the inner prison and placing their feet in the stocks! Then he went about his own business and finally to sleep.
  - ~ The “inner prison” was the safest, most protected, hardest to escape place in the jail.
- What did Paul and Silas do? Look at Acts 16:25—they prayed and sang hymns and worship songs to God. And all the other prisoners were listening to them!

**TEACHING TIP:** Put yourself in this scene. You have just cast out an evil spirit from a poor young woman, being used by callous men. Shouldn't this have elicited a celebration? Instead, you are falsely accused, publicly humiliated, beaten, imprisoned, chained down with no hope of escape. What would you do? Break out in praise songs?! That is exactly what we see here with Paul and Silas—can you hear them? What an incredible testimony to the other prisoners who were witnessing this scene.

→ **NOTE:** Paul and Silas had preached Jesus. Now in an unjust, difficult situation they worshipped Him!

- The story continues like a grand cinematic movie ... it's as if heaven heard this God glorifying music ... and responded. (Acts 16:26-27)

- ~ The ground began to move back and forth from an earthquake.

- ~ The foundations of the prison were shaken, causing the doors of every prison cell to open and the shackles to fall off every prisoner.

- ~ These prisoners were free to run. But no one tried to escape.

- The jailer awakened and saw all the cell doors were open. He assumed all the prisoners had escaped. He pulled out his sword to kill himself because he knew he would be put to death for allowing the prisoners to escape under his watch.

- Paul cried out to the jailer that all the prisoners were still in their cells.

- In response to all of this, the jailer, a Gentile, asked the most important question he would ever ask--“*Sirs, what must I do to be saved?*” (Acts 16:30)

⇒ **The answer – “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved ...” (Acts 16:31)**

- ~ Believe: trust in, rely on, adhere to ... entrust yourself completely (mind, body, soul)

- ~ The Lord: (kurios) Supreme, Sovereign God

- ~ Jesus: Both Savior and Lord/Master

**APPLICATION:** What an amazing witness to an amazing God! How would we respond in this situation—grumble, doubt God, or SING?

**TEACHING TIP:** Satan (the accuser) had been at work in the angry mob that resulted in Paul and Silas being thrown into prison. Satan (the murderer) remained at work in the prison—if the jailer had killed himself, he never would have heard the good news and been saved, neither would his household.

- The promise and way of salvation was also told to all of the jailer’s household ... and they believed!
- The next day the magistrates sent their men to release Paul and Silas from prison, but Paul refused to go. It is here when Paul revealed that he and Silas were Roman citizens. Paul did not want to be secretly whisked out of town. Why?
  - ~ If Paul had left secretly, the town people might have assumed he was guilty as charged.
  - ~ Revealing his Roman citizenship gave a certain amount of respect to the gospel and the new church he had established in Philippi.

## ✿ FINAL THOUGHTS

- ✦ **In Acts 15, the Church leaders answered through God’s Word how a person is saved. Salvation comes through the work of Christ and Christ alone.**
- ✦ **In Acts 16, God planted a new church in Philippi by introducing Jesus to a wealthy woman, demonstrating His rescuing power to an exploited girl, and saving a calloused Roman jailer. The early church was diverse.**
- ✦ **How do we apply what we have learned to our lives?**
  - ⚙ May this lesson convict us all to know God’s Word so that we are not lured into believing that the way of salvation is anything other than God’s work, His sacrifice on our behalf. It is about His grace, not anything that we have done or ever can do.
  - ⚙ May this lesson convict us to see that God calls all kinds of people—some rich, some poor, some with sordid backgrounds, some from hardened backgrounds. All are living stones that He is using to build His church. Some we will relate to, others we may not but Jesus is Master over us all!! We are called to unity, not uniformity.
- ✦ **The Holy Spirit empowered these men to build the church. The Spirit empowered them to faithfully plumb it to God’s Word alone (no matter the external pressures to compromise). We are a part of that story—a diverse group of individuals empowered by the Holy Spirit to become one in Jesus Christ.**