

# Explore the Bible: Available to All

November 27, 2017

- *The Explore the Bible lesson for Dec. 17 focuses on Acts 15:6-11, 24-31.*

Disagreements within the church often are broadly reported. It's as if they are plastered on billboards to air the dirty laundry of ordinary people. We must remember that's exactly what the church is—ordinary people trying desperately to follow our unordinary God.

People on both sides of the disagreement described in Acts 15:1-5 had good motives. They simply disagreed. In response, the church did the right thing by calling a gathering to discuss and decide the matter prayerfully. Ask your group: *How might we learn from this example?*

What matters most is that God's rescue—salvation—is made available to all who will believe and follow. Adding anything to grace causes it to cease being grace, and we are left with law alone that will not rescue us. Today, we also should strive with the reality of grace and how it shapes us, not our laws or regulations.

## No Distinction (Acts 15:6-11)

After reading this portion of Peter's speech, have your group read Romans 3:21-31. *Discuss the truth of God being the God of all—Jews and Gentiles—and how faith is more important than religious expectation.*

Even though there is "no distinction" between the Jewish and Gentile converts, there is a clear distinction between those who believe and those

who do not—the gift of the Holy Spirit. Verse 8 was the key ingredient Peter focused on to prove the Gentiles needed nothing else than the Spirit of God inside them.

The great concern is in verses 10-11. The “yoke” here reminds one of the burden of slavery. A yoke binds the ox to the wagon it is pulling, and the ox cannot get away from it. The last thing we want to do is add a burden to those who are being freed from sin! *How do we keep from adding unnecessary burdens to new believers?*

Peter’s response is that we must declare grace as our means to salvation. Nothing we do can rescue us from our sinful slavery, and so, grace has to be what moves us from slave to free.

## **Clear Expectations (Acts 15:24-29)**

This letter was intended to be a blessing to all, and it is beautiful to read this in light of James’ statement: “It is my judgment, therefore, that we should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God” (Acts 15:19). These believers could celebrate in the same freedom without added burdens.

Notice the structure here: the problem is stated, unity is pictured, the solution is presented, and Christians are urged to live in light of their mutual salvation. This is beautifully done to both welcome and offer their mutual expectation for living out their salvation.

*Have your group bring up (or come up with) an example of what this would look like in your church body. How might churches do well to follow this example?* The fact is that when we welcome, we also must follow God’s expectation of us as we follow him. Our living should change, and so our lifestyle should mimic God, not the world.

# Secure Encouragement (Acts 15:30-31)

Henri Nouwen once said, “One of the main tasks of theology is to find words that do not divide but unite, that do not create conflict but unity, that do not hurt but heal.” These words here prove this to be true. The encouragement brought unity.

As the council at Jerusalem had gathered, these local gatherings of believers gathered, probably in angst to hear what their “fate” would be. Can you imagine the party that exploded as they heard these words? This unity brought gladness for the entire community.

In verse 32, we are told two prophets lingered to add strength by encouraging these churches. This should be our practical task—strengthen the church by speaking encouraging words of unity. *How will we accomplish this practically in our church?*

## Conclusion

Highlight the significance of this story to your group, because we all must walk away from this lesson (1) affirming that salvation is available to all who will believe and follow, and (2) strengthening the church by encouraging words of unity.

Like us today, the church then was a unique blend of variety. Jews were converting, Gentiles were converting, and the church was growing into uncharted lands and people groups. At the same time, their variety of backgrounds and expectations had to be submitted to God’s expectations, which required them to lay down their own expectations.

Consider this quote from Felix Mendelssohn, the great classical composer: “The essence of the beautiful is unity in variety.” *Ask your group to speak a word of encouragement, giving thanks for the variety we come from and*

*the unity we share in God's rescue.*

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