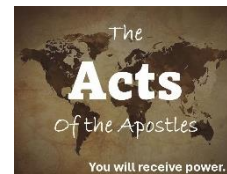




## Is Salvation by Law or by Grace? Acts 15:1-41 (Lesson #22)



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16-point outline of Chapter 15:1-41:

- 1) Luke opens describing how men came down from Judea to Antioch and began teaching the Gentile believers that unless they were circumcised, they could not be saved (15:1).
- 2) This created a great deal of confusion among the brethren and Paul and Barnabas had strong disagreements with them and the church opted to send Paul and Barnabas to Jerusalem to the apostles and elders (15:2).
- 3) Luke then records their journey to Jerusalem and their reception once they arrived (15:3-4).
- 4) In the council meeting the first to present their argument were Pharisees who had become Christians (15:5-6).
- 5) Next Peter presented his argument (15:7-11).
- 6) Then Barnabas and Paul described the signs and wonders that God wrought through them as they preached to the Gentiles (15:12).
- 7) Next James stood up and said what we are hearing about from Peter, Barnabas, and Paul was predicted by the prophets (15:13-15).
- 8) James then quotes Amos 9:11-12 as the proof text of what the prophets taught on this matter (15:16-18).
- 9) Then James provides his overall determination (15:19-20).
- 10) Then James explains why he made a four point recommendation about the Gentiles (15:21).
- 11) The apostles and the elders concurred with James and they decided to write a letter to the churches and to send Judas and Silas back with Barnabas and Paul (15:22-29).
- 12) Paul and Barnabas along with the others return to Antioch and upon their arrival gathered the church and read the letter which caused great rejoicing with the Gentile believers (15:30-31).
- 13) Judas and Silas also encouraged the believers in Antioch until their ultimate return to Jerusalem (15:32-33).
- 14) Paul and Barnabas continued teaching and preaching in Antioch and ultimately Paul recommended to Barnabas that they go back and visit those cities they visited on the first missionary journey (15:35-36).
- 15) Barnabas recommended bring John Mark, but Paul thought that was a very bad idea (15:37-38).
- 16) This caused Barnabas and Paul to part and Barnabas took John Mark and sailed to Cyprus while Paul took Silas and went through Syria and Cilicia (15:39-41).

***15:1 But some men came down from Judea and were teaching the brothers, "Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved."***

As Paul and Barnabas are ministering there in Antioch, men come down from Judea, down in elevation.

These men are Jewish believers and there in Antioch, these Jewish believers begin to share with the brothers in Antioch: ***"Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved."***

Now we do not know how they got an audience, we do not know if they just starting teaching this in little pockets, we simply do not know the logistics.

One wonders, what would cause these Jewish men to travel all the way to Antioch in Syria with this message? Clearly this concern, this question has been developing in the church in Judea.

These Jewish believers come, with a message they have likely had many discussions about, namely without circumcision, salvation is not possible for Gentiles.

Imagine hearing this message. Listen, I know you are sincere, but there is much more to do than simply believe in Jesus to be saved, to be justified before God. To be saved, you must first become a Jewish proselyte and then you can place faith in Jesus Christ.

**This is contrary** to what Paul and Barnabas have been teaching, this is contrary to what Peter taught at Cornelius' home when God poured out His Holy Spirit on the Gentiles.

**You and I cannot imagine how significant** what is about to happen is, but the gospel hangs in the balance. **Are men saved by grace through faith as Paul has been teaching or must they submit to the Jewish law?**

No doubt Satan is behind all this and he would have loved to bring in a works-based salvation into the church's understanding of what it takes to be saved.

**This is the question that is developing and there is no greater question than this one. Equally, this is the greatest challenge that the church faced!**

These men come from Judea and are teaching that Gentiles must be circumcised and submit to the law of Moses to be saved!

*Vs 2 - And after Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and debate with them, Paul and Barnabas and some of the others were appointed to go up to Jerusalem to the apostles and the elders about this question.*

Paul and Barnabas we are told, had **no small dissension** and **debate** with these men about what they were teaching. If it is not a small dissension or debate what does that mean?

Yes, Paul and Barnabas had a **massive dissension** and **debate** with these men and what they were teaching.

This is not one of those issues we can agree to disagree, this is a fundamental point of the gospel (Eph 2:8-9).

The word translated **dissension** is: The Greek word is **στάσις (stasis)**, it can mean **dissension, sedition, or uproar**, this is a **heated argument**.

Paul and Barnabas are no doubt holding to salvation being by grace through faith totally apart from the law and along comes these Jewish believers who save you Gentiles here in Antioch are **not saved** and in fact you **cannot be saved** unless you **submit to all the law of Moses!**

The word translated **debate** is to **reason** and **dispute**. There is no doubt Paul began to pull from the **Old Testament verses that taught a time was coming when men would be saved by grace**.

This **heated argument**, this **theological debate** was not settled by either group, they did not come to a **common understanding**. Quite the opposite, although we do not know how long this went on, neither side was budging, those who demanded men be circumcised to be saved and Paul and Barnabas who were teaching grace through faith.

**IMAGINE:** Likely, many of the Gentiles in Antioch were confused. **Who was correct?**

**Then a decision is reached:** The decision was that Paul and Barnabas with some others who were appointed would go **to Jerusalem, back to the apostles and elders** there, with this question.

Now, I want to make sure we are **clear on a few things:**

- 1) You see the **authority of the apostles**.
- 2) Why didn't they **refer to the New Testament?**
- 3) **Today what is our authority?**

We no longer have the apostles, but we have the writings of the apostles and their immediate associates and **that is our authority!**

Paul and Barnabas knew the answer, but this was a bigger issue. This was a **cancer** that **started in Judea** and had **metastasized to Antioch in Syria**.

**This question had to be addressed and answered** by the **apostles (the authority)** of the New Testament church.

*Vs 3 - So, being sent on their way by the church, they passed through both Phoenicia and Samaria, describing in detail the conversion of the Gentiles, and brought great joy to all the brothers.*

This group being sent on their way by the church, passed through Phoenicia and Samaria. As they are traveling they are describing in great detail how the Gentiles are coming to faith in Jesus.

No doubt Paul is sharing stories from the first missionary journey and as they are doing this it is bringing “great joy” to all the brothers, there seems to be this general sense of excitement as they share with Jewish believers what God is doing in the Gentile world and how many are coming to faith in Jesus.

*Vs 4 - When they came to Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the church and the apostles and the elders, and they declared all that God had done with them.*

When they came to Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the church and the apostles, and the elders.

Here you see three distinct groups:

- 1) Church members
- 2) Elders (pastors)
  - a. Again, this is a transitory time as the mantle is slowly being passed from the apostles to the elders.
- 3) Apostles
  - a. At this point, to the best of our understanding the only apostle who has been martyred was James.

There in Jerusalem, to the church, the apostles, and the elders they declared all that God had done with them (this is likely a reference to what God had done through them on the first missionary journey).

*Vs 5 - But some believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees rose up and said, "It is necessary to circumcise them and to order them to keep the law of Moses."*

**Here we go.** But some of the believers, who belonged to the **party of the Pharisees...**

**So these were Christians who had once been Pharisees, who had a very high regard for the law, so we can understand why they might think this way.**

**Pause:** There are Pharisees who have placed faith in Jesus Christ. These are those experts of the Jewish law and we can be sure they have been discussing this “**issue**” and they are the group who speaks, here is their determination: *"It is necessary to circumcise them and to order them to keep the law of Moses."*

**Now consider what they are saying:**

- 1) You must submit to circumcise you and your male children.
- 2) You must keep the law of Moses the rest of your days.

The word translated “necessary” is the Greek word **δεῖ (dei)**, they **must be circumcised and keep the law of Moses**, it is a **necessity that they be circumcised and keep the law of Moses**.

Here it is, clearly laid down by the Pharisees who have become followers of Christ.

**It is a necessity that these Gentile believers get circumcised and start keeping all the laws of Moses.**

OK, the stage is set. Were Paul and Barnabas wrong in telling these Gentiles that all they had to do was believe and they could be saved?

Were the thousands of Gentiles who had placed faith, not really saved because they had not be circumcised and they were not keeping all the Jewish laws?

**OR, were Paul and Barnabas right?** Men and women are saved by the grace of God through faith?

Let me share with you the words of a former Pharisee (Paul) (Gal 2:16).

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*Vs 6 - The apostles and the elders were gathered together to consider this matter.*

The apostles (11) and elders gathered together to consider this question.

*Vs 7 - And after there had been much debate, Peter stood up and said to them, "Brothers, you know that in the early days God made a choice among you, that by my mouth the Gentiles should hear the word of the gospel and believe.*

After **much debate**, so you can imagine there was a **great deal of back and forth**, a **great deal of discussion**, we would suspect that at times **the arguments got heated** with each side certain that their understanding.

**Wouldn't you like to see the minutes of this meeting?**

After much debate, **Peter stood up** and reminded them how through his preaching, the Gentiles **heard the word of the gospel** and believed, he of course is talking about what happened at Cornelius' home.

But then he comes to the **clincher in his argument**.

*Vs 8 - And God, who knows the heart, bore witness to them, by giving them the Holy Spirit just as he did to us, 9 and he made no distinction between us and them, having cleansed their hearts by faith.*

And God, who knows the heart, bore witness of them:

- 1) **That they had truly believed.**
- 2) **That they had truly become part of the body of Christ.**

**God bore witness** of them by giving them **the Holy Spirit**, just as he had done in Acts chapter 2 with **Jews who had believed**. Remember what happened in Cornelius' home ( Acts 10:35-48).

**The gift of the Holy Spirit, as evidence by speaking in tongues was the undeniable proof that this group was saved by God.**

For as Peter says: *He gave these Gentiles the Holy Spirit just as he did to us,*

Then Peter adds: *God made no distinction between us and them, having cleansed their hearts by faith.*

Notice, their hearts were cleansed by keeping the law... NO, their hearts were cleansed BY FAITH!

You see, God cleansed their hearts not by circumcision or keeping the law, **but by faith!**

We take this truth for granted, but here we see the **early church is struggling to resolve this matter of the law and faith.**

**Peter's argument is very compelling for God put his stamp of approval on these Gentiles by giving them the gift of the Holy Spirit.**

*Vs 10 - Now, therefore, why are you putting God to the test by placing a yoke on the neck of the disciples that neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear?*

The Peter asks two **probing questions** that includes and **obvious indictment**.

**QUESTION #1 - WHY: Are you putting God to the test...?**

Peter is saying to demand these Gentiles keep the law of Moses is putting God to the test. To teach a work-based salvation is to put God to the test!

**QUESTION #2 - WHY: Are you placing a yoke on the neck of the disciples...?**

**The indictment**, for neither we nor are fathers have been able to bear it, to **keep the law**. This is like an **honest assessment of the whole problem**.

You can picture Peter here, you want to demand these Gentile believers keep the law, but we do not keep it perfectly, neither did our fathers.

*Vs 11 - But we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will."*

Then Peter comes to the punchline. Then Peter declares what he believes is true, but, **we believe that we will be saved** through the grace of the Lord Jesus, **just as they will**.

I would have imagined that he would have said, we believe that they will be saved like us.

That is not what he said, we believe that we will be saved, just like them!

**This is the apostle Peter**, who is dead level honest. Even as Jewish believers, we do not believe we are saved by obeying the Mosaic law, but rather by the grace of the Lord Jesus.

**We need to come to God, like they did!**

I bet you could have heard a pin drop.

Who can argue with anything Peter has said, all of this is true and all demands a final conclusion that we are all saved, if we are saved at all, by the grace of God, apart from the works of the law.

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**Now if I were not familiar with the story, I would think this is the end of the meeting. Peter has dropped the mic; Peter has built an iron-clad argument!**

*Vs 12 - And all the assembly fell silent, and they listened to Barnabas and Paul as they related what signs and wonders God had done through them among the Gentiles.*

Then Luke tell us that the assembly fell silent as they listened to Barnabas and Paul as they shared all the **signs, miracles, and wonders** that God had done to the Gentiles.

Now notice all the men are listening, they have ceased arguing, they are considering what Peter had shared and now they begin to listen to Paul and Barnabas as they shared all that God had done through them, to the Gentiles.

*Vs 13-15 - After they finished speaking, James replied, "Brothers, listen to me. 14 Simeon has related how God first visited the Gentiles, to take from them a people for his name. 15 And with this the words of the prophets agree, just as it is written,*

The Paul and Barnabas finished speaking and James spoke. This is not James the apostle who was martyred by Herod Agrippa I. This is James, the half-brother of Jesus, who history tells us became one of the elders at the church in Jerusalem.

After Barnabas and Paul, James the Lord's half-brother stands up and says: Simeon (Peter) has related how God visited the Gentiles to call out of the Gentiles a people for his name.

But then he says this: ***And with this the words of the prophets agree, just as it is written,***

Now we have talked previously about many of the verses that declare that God always planned to save Gentiles, that Gentiles were always a part of God's salvation plan (Gen 22:17-18; Ps 22:27; Ps 86:8-9; Is 42:1; Is 55:3-5; Dan 7:13-14).

Interesting enough, James does not quote any of those. Let's look at what he says, then look at where he quoted this from, and try to understand what he believes this means.

Now what has been missing from this discussion is a reference to what the Scriptures say, a call to review the Old Testament (Scriptures) on this matter of Gentiles coming into a relationship with Yahweh, James is about to change that!

***Vs 16-18 - "After this I will return, and I will rebuild the tent of David that has fallen; I will rebuild its ruins, and I will restore it, 17 that the remnant of mankind may seek the Lord, and all the Gentiles who are called by my name, says the Lord, who makes these things 18 known from of old."***

Now let's look at the quote (Am 9:11-12).

This is a very interesting quote and not one I would have used to prove that God always intended to save Gentiles. But that likely shows how much deeper James' understanding of the Old Testament is than mine.

### **What is James saying?**

**FIRST**, notice James says "**the prophets**" so although he is only going to quote Amos, he believed that this witness, that the Gentiles would be included with Jews in God's salvation plan, and it was witnessed by multiple prophets.

**SECOND**, James selected Amos to quote. This is a very interesting quote and, in this quote, Amos is looking forward to a time when God would restore the broken-down house of David.

It is worth noting that James quotes the Septuagint (Greek version) of this text. The Septuagint translation speaks of the Gentiles seeking the Lord.

Even the Masoretic text fits with James' argument, for it speaks of people, who will be called by Yahweh's name.

Amos sees a time when mankind will seek the Lord, even Gentiles will be called by God's name.

Those called by God's name are in a saving relationship with God. Amos looked forward to a time when God would claim a people for Himself among the Gentiles.

James is agreeing with Peter, and saying that the time of the Gentile inclusion into God's people is NOW!

Difficult verse to make this point, but that is his point.

**Notice, no one speaks out against his interpretation!**

***Vs 19 - Therefore my judgment is that we should not trouble those of the Gentiles who turn to God,***

James then brings his argument to a conclusion:

We have heard from our brothers, with a Pharisaical background, we have heard from Peter as he shared about God giving the Gentiles the gift of the Holy Spirit (by faith with no connection to the Mosaic law), we have heard from Paul about the miracles and the salvation experience of thousands of Gentiles (all by faith with no connection to the Mosaic law).

Based on the fact we have multiple witnesses from the Old Testament that God would one day do this, I therefore judge.

WOW! James, likely the leading elder in Jerusalem, says I have heard enough and we must conclude that salvation is offered to all by grace through faith!

Therefore, here is **my judgment**, here is my **determination**, here is **what I judge to be the next right step**.

I bet you could have heard a pin drop as everyone in the room listened for James' judgment.

**DRUM ROLL:** *we should not trouble those of the Gentiles who turn to God,*

**There it is.** Grace by faith. That is the sole answer. Period. Nothing less and nothing more!

Paul was correct and the Judaizers were incorrect!

James the Lord's half-brother, one of the elders at the church in Jerusalem comes to his conclusion. **We should not trouble them with any requirements of the Mosaic code.**

*Vs 20 - but should write to them to abstain from the things polluted by idols, and from sexual immorality, and from what has been strangled, and from blood.*

Then and this is odd, he says that we should **write to them** about **four things**:

- 1) They should abstain from **meats and foods that have been polluted** (offered to) idols.
  - a. During these times when you went down to the meat market, a great majority of the meat had been sacrificed to an idol.
  - b. A Christian from a Jewish background would be much more sensitive to this issue than a Gentile Christian.
- 2) They should abstain from **sexual immorality**.
  - a. It is almost certain from the context that we are not talking about sex outside of wedlock.
  - b. It is likely talking about marriage practices that would be accepted in the Gentile world, but unacceptable in the Jewish world (Lev 18:6-18).
- 3) They should abstain from **things that were strangled**.
  - a. Strangled has to do with the kosher preparation. If you are following kosher practices, you cut the animals throat, you bleed it out (Lev 17:13-14).
- 4) They should abstain from **eating or drinking blood**.
  - a. This was forbidden by the Jews (Lev 17:11-12).

Then James tells us **why these four are on his list...**

*Vs 21 - For from ancient generations Moses has had in every city those who proclaim him, for he is read every Sabbath in the synagogues."*

There is enough confusion and even in some case anger with Gentiles coming into a relationship with Yahweh through the blood of Jesus.

I believe he picks four items that are particularly relevant to Jews, as a method to tamp down possible charges by Jews about Gentile believers being licentious.

You see this is about not needlessly offending a Jewish brother or sister in Christ. Rather than taunting your liberty, James is encouraging Gentile believers to act in such a way that will not needlessly offend your Jewish Christian brothers and sisters in Christ.

So do not worry about living by the laws of Moses, instead worry about living by the laws of King Jesus and following the law of love, which means not needlessly offending Jewish believers.

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So you can imagine all in attendance discussing these things, you can imagine all in attendance considering James' recommendations. Then we read.

***Vs 22 - Then it seemed good to the apostles and the elders, with the whole church, to choose men from among them and send them to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas. They sent Judas called Barsabbas, and Silas, leading men among the brothers,***

Having heard James' recommendation, it seemed good to the apostles, the elders present, with the whole church in Jerusalem to choose men from among the church in Jerusalem who they would send to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas.

They chose two men Judas (also called Barsabbas) and Silas.

Both of these men were leading men among the brothers there in Jerusalem. They would accompany Paul and Barnabas and serve as witnesses, that this was the finding of the apostles, elders, and church in Jerusalem.

***Vs 23 - with the following letter: "The brothers, both the apostles and the elders, to the brothers who are of the Gentiles in Antioch and Syria and Cilicia, greetings.***

Not only would Judas and Silas accompany Paul and Barnabas, but they would carry a letter to the church.

The letter would open with a salutation that it was from the apostles and elders in Jerusalem, to brothers, fellow believers, who are in Antioch and Syria and Cilicia.

Greetings...

***Vs 24-26 - Since we have heard that some persons have gone out from us and troubled you with words, unsettling your minds, although we gave them no instructions, 25 it has seemed good to us, having come to one accord, to choose men and send them to you with our beloved Barnabas and Paul, 26 men who have risked their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.***

We heard that some people have gone out from us and troubled you with words, that unsettled your minds. We did not tell anyone to do that. They were on independent operations.

In fact, it seemed good to us (apostles and elders in Jerusalem) having come to an agreement on this issue to send men who have risked their lives for the gospel with the beloved Barnabas and Paul.

***Vs 27 - We have therefore sent Judas and Silas, who themselves will tell you the same things by word of mouth.***

Therefore we are sending Judas and Silas who will tell you by their mouths the same things you are reading in a letter from us.



***Vs 28-29 - For it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to lay on you no greater burden than these requirements: 29 that you abstain from what has been sacrificed to idols, and from blood, and from what has been strangled, and from sexual immorality. If you keep yourselves from these, you will do well. Farewell."***

I love how they say, it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us, to lay no greater burden than this.

I pray that as a Sunday School class and as a church, we are being guided by the Holy Spirit!

Then they review the four areas, the ones that James had recommended, they tell them if they keep themselves from these things they do well.

Farewell.

There it is, **this matter is settled with the infant church**, and should be settled for the church throughout time, we are saved by grace through faith...

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***Vs 30 - So when they were sent off, they went down to Antioch, and having gathered the congregation together, they delivered the letter.***

Paul and Barnabas, along with Judas and Silas arrive back in Antioch.

They gather the congregation and they formally deliver the letter that came from the apostles and elders in Jerusalem.

***Vs 31 - And when they had read it, they rejoiced because of its encouragement.***

When they read it the believers rejoiced, salvation by grace through faith has been confirmed by the apostles and elders in Jerusalem. The Gentile brothers were greatly encouraged.

We can imagine. They are in a right standing with God, they do not need to become Jewish proselytes to be saved.

***Vs 32 - And Judas and Silas, who were themselves prophets, encouraged and strengthened the brothers with many words.***

Then Silas and Judas who were prophets also encouraged and strengthened the Gentiles brothers.

***Vs 33 - And after they had spent some time, they were sent off in peace by the brothers to those who had sent them.***

After they were there some time, they were sent off in peace, by the brothers, sent back to those who sent them.

***Vs 34 - However, it seemed good to Silas to remain there. (NKJV)***

This verse is in the Textus Receptus (Greek New Testament), which underlies the KJV and the NKJV, but it is not in older manuscripts and most Greek scholars believe it was added along the way by a scribe attempting to explain why Silas was available for the second missionary journey (Acts 15:40).

***Vs 35 - But Paul and Barnabas remained in Antioch, teaching and preaching the word of the Lord, with many others also.***

So back from the Jerusalem Council, Paul and Barnabas remained in Antioch, teaching and preaching the word of the Lord. We are told that there were many others with them.

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*Vs 36 - And after some days Paul said to Barnabas, "Let us return and visit the brothers in every city where we proclaimed the word of the Lord, and see how they are."*

After some time had passed, after some days, Paul said to Barnabas: *"Let us return and visit the brothers in every city where we proclaimed the word of the Lord, and see how they are."*

You can imagine like a parent concerned about his children, Paul is concerned about the converts from the first missionary journey. He looks at Barnabas and says, hey, let's retrace our steps and see how the believers (disciples) are doing.

As you think about Paul, he was clearly an evangelist. But equally, he was a man concerned with discipleship. He wanted to bring as many people as he could into the kingdom, and then he wanted to disciple them.

*Vs 37 - Now Barnabas wanted to take with them John called Mark.*

I can picture this in my mind, Barnabas, the **son of consolation**, the one who **always sees the best in people**, says Paul **I think that is a wonderful idea**, let me give **John Mark a call** and **see if he can accompany us**.

I would love for John Mark to go on the trip with us!

*Vs 38 - But Paul thought best not to take with them one who had withdrawn from them in Pamphylia and had not gone with them to the work.*

Paul, again I can picture this said, listen Barnabas, I get he is your cousin, I get you would like for him to join us and maybe even **redeem himself**, but I would **remind you** he is the one who withdrew from us in Pamphylia.

Let's be honest Barnabas, we had barely gotten the trip started when he bailed on us.

We really could have used him in some of the more difficult cities like Antioch, Iconium, and Lystra, but he **ran back to Jerusalem** and left us hanging. No, I do not think it is a good idea to bring John Mark. In fact Barnabas, it is a very bad idea.

*Vs 39 - And there arose a sharp disagreement, so that they separated from each other. Barnabas took Mark with him and sailed away to Cyprus,*

This verse is **very unexpected**. But this issue over John Mark and bringing him along created a **sharp disagreement**, it created a **sharp contention**, let's be honest this was a **real disagreement** between these two godly servants of the Lord Jesus. The contention was so sharp that **they separated from one another**.

Barnabas took John Mark and sailed for Cyprus. It appears that Barnabas and John Mark were going to retrace the steps that Paul and Barnabas took on the first missionary journey.

*Vs 40-41 - but Paul chose Silas and departed, having been commended by the brothers to the grace of the Lord. 41 And he went through Syria and Cilicia, strengthening the churches."*

Paul chose Silas (who had likely traveled back from Jerusalem) and having been commended by the brothers to the grace of the Lord, they went through Syria and Cilicia strengthening the churches.

We are now set for the second missionary journey recorded in the book of Acts.

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