

# Resolution Amongst Believers & Sensitivity to the Spirit

<b>Key Text:</b>	Acts 15 & 16
<b>Key Verse(s):</b>	“And at midnight Paul and Silas prayed, and sang praises unto God: and the prisoners heard them.” (Acts 16:25)

## Background to the Study

Acts 15 describes the first session of the Early Church held by the Apostles and elders in Jerusalem which probably occurred about A.D. 50. The decision made by James and the church elders at this session is one of the most crucial determinations recorded in the Book of Acts. In the infancy of the Early Church, most of those who converted to Christianity were Jews who had already been circumcised according to Old Testament Law. However, as the groups of Gentile believers at Antioch, throughout Galatia, and in other areas grew, it became imperative that a decision be made regarding whether Gentile Christians should be required to follow Jewish Law, as some insisted. Verses 1-5 record that after Paul and Barnabas disputed with those who felt circumcision was necessary, the determination was made to bring the matter before the Apostles and elders at Jerusalem. The fact that when conflicts arose in a local assembly, the church authorities in Jerusalem settled the matter, also indicates that there was a hierarchy of authority within the church. Peter reiterated that God had confirmed the authenticity of the Gentiles' conversion by “giving them the Holy Ghost” (vs. 8). He cites this as evidence that God had previously purified their hearts by faith (vs. 9), thus substantiating not only the baptism of the Holy Ghost but also the doctrine of entire sanctification. The Apostle James was the brother of Jesus and moderator at the council, as well as pastor of the church at Jerusalem. In verses 13-21, he was the one to declare the conclusion that believing in Christ is the only necessity for salvation. Verses 22-35 relate that James' declaration was supported by “the apostles and elders, with the whole church,” their unanimity bearing witness that the conclusion was Spirit-inspired. The decision was confirmed by a letter that was taken by a delegation to the Gentile believers, which brought great joy to the believers at Antioch.

The second half of Acts 15 describes the beginning of Paul's second missionary journey, and the spread of Christianity northward and westward from his base in Antioch of Syria. In Acts 15:36, Paul suggested that he and Barnabas visit places where they had planted churches on their earlier missionary trip. Acts 15:36-41 records that a contention arose between Paul and Barnabas. John Mark had left them during their earlier missionary journey, and at this point, the two men differed on whether it was advisable to have him accompany them on this second trip. The Bible makes no effort to disguise the controversy; rather, it shows Christians acting in a very human manner. “The contention was so sharp between them” that they parted ways, with Barnabas and Mark going back to Cyprus. Paul later reconciled with John Mark, as recorded in Colossians 4:10; Philemon 1:24;

and 2 Timothy 4:11, and the younger man eventually wrote the second of the four Gospels. Paul chose Silas to accompany him in Barnabas' place. Silas was a member of the Jerusalem church, and like Paul, was also a Roman citizen (Acts 16:37). It was on this second journey, in the city of Lystra, that Paul met Timothy (Timotheus). Timothy's father was a Greek, so Paul had Timothy circumcised, not because it was a Christian requirement, but so that he could enter and preach in Jewish synagogues. Verses 9-12 record the famous Macedonian call—the plea, “Come over. . . and help us.” The first opposition in Philippi came through a slave girl who was demon-possessed. Paul commanded the evil spirit to come out, and when the young woman's masters realized their source of financial gain was no more, they “drew” (or dragged) Paul and Silas before the magistrates (Roman praetors). Verses 16-34 record Paul and Silas' incarceration and the miraculous conversion of the Philippian jailor. The dungeon in which the two men were confined was likely a dark, underground hole below the jailor's house since he brought them into his own house after the earthquake (vs. 34). Why Paul waited to divulge his citizenship is not clear, but he must have been led by the Spirit, as it was through Paul and Silas' suffering in jail that the jailor and his family were saved.

## Testimony from Our Day

During the American Civil War, as darkness descended the night before the Battle of Stones River, a Union Army band began to play softly the song, “Home Sweet Home.” After a time, a Confederate band began to play along. Soon another regimental band joined in, and then another, till all the bands from both sides of the conflict were playing together. The soldiers were quiet, likely pondering whether they would ever see home again. As the strains of “Home Sweet Home” began to fade away into the darkness, the hearts of the soldiers were touched and they were reminded of the cause they were fighting for—home! Music has wonderful power. It can soothe a tiny baby to sleep. It can encourage the downcast to give a shout for the battle. It can comfort at the bedside of a dying child of God. Music can calm the heart after a trying day at the office, or add a mellow backdrop to a candlelit meal. It can humble us as we remember the tremendous price paid for freedom, and stir us to worship as we consider the tremendous price paid for our spiritual deliverance. While the benefits music can bring are undeniable, it is not always easy to sing. In times of trial, pain, or crisis, it might seem impossible to lift our voices in praise. In today's text, Paul and Silas had been beaten and thrown into prison. No doubt they were suffering terrible pain from the bleeding wounds on their backs, and the fact that their feet were secured in stocks. Singing would not be the natural response in such circumstances! Yet even though the two men did not know what the morrow would bring, they sang. What made that possible? Perhaps our focus verse gives the answer: before they “sang praises unto God,” Paul and Silas “prayed”! The Holy Spirit must have stirred their hearts as they communed with God, helping them to focus on Him and sing in the midst of the pain. Sometimes we too must make a decision to sing or offer praise to God in spite of circumstances. It may cost us something to do so, but it will be a pleasing sacrifice to the Lord.

# A Closer Look

Question 1	The meeting of the Council of Jerusalem, described in chapter 15, is one of the great turning points in the Book of Acts. What issue was brought before the Council, and why do you think Peter's address to the council had such an impact?
Question 2	Why was the decision made by the Council of Jerusalem so significant?
Question 3	What can we learn from the text about the proper way to resolve problems and preserve unity in the church?
Question 4	The words of the demon-possessed slave girl were true. Why do you think what she said disturbed Paul so much? Acts 16:16-18
Question 5	Paul received direction from the Holy Spirit in the form of a vision of a man from Macedonia. Acts 16:9-10. What are some other ways the Spirit gives direction?
Question 6	Chapter 16 records that while the missionaries were in Philippi, opposition arose when a demon-possessed slave girl was delivered. Paul and Silas were taken before the magistrates, and then beaten and placed in stocks in the inner prison. At midnight, however, the two men prayed and sang praises to God. While we may never be beaten and imprisoned for our faith, we will experience trials of some nature. What are the benefits of keeping a spirit of praise, even in hard circumstances?

## Take Home

When we come to a "fork in the road" in our personal lives, we may initially be influenced by personal convictions. But like the elders at Jerusalem, we must seek divine guidance. We should look to Scripture for directing principles and the confirmation of God's Word, while whole-heartedly submitting to God's will. In addition, we can seek the counsel of godly Christian friends and leaders. We want to be certain that God is directing us! While our personal decisions may not impact the course of Christian history, they may well determine our eternal destiny.

We cannot always choose our circumstances, but like Paul and Silas, we can choose to pray and sing in our dark hours.