

# **BIBLE TEACHING AND WORSHIP GUIDE**



## **FOR THE HOME-BASED CHURCH**

**Produced Weekly**

**Receiving People As God Does  
Acts 15:1-22**

Copy this sheet for the Gathering Time, Bible Study, and Worship Experience leaders for the next meeting of the church.

## Leaders' Responsibilities:

**Important:** Each person who will be leading one of the three parts of a session during a Unit of sessions needs to have access to the "Basic Information for Leading the Unit of Study". That information is often provided at the beginning of that Unit of sessions. The weekly session "Background" located in the Teacher Preparation is much more specific to that day's study.

1. **The Gathering Time Leader** will gather all of the people together and help them prepare their minds and hearts for a wonderful worship experience before God. His/her responsibility is to introduce the congregation to the theme (content) and the Scripture that will be central to their worship experience for the day.

2. **The Bible Study Leader** will then help the people understand what the Scriptures have to say and teach us about the content of the study for the day. He/she will guide the people to make a general application of the study (ie: How does this Bible study apply to people today?)

3. **The Worship Time Leader** has the responsibility to use the theme and Scriptures to guide the congregation to make personal commitments to God's will for each one in regard to the study for the day. He/she will use others to lead in the music, taking the offering, ministry moment comments, and other activities and parts of the **Worship Time** that can aid in participatory worship.

## Prior to this Coming Session:

### **Gathering Time Leader:**

### **Bible Study Leader:**

Bring a dictionary that has a clear definition of the word "religion".

### **Worship Time Leader:**

## Music Sources:

“The Bond of Love”, *The Baptist Hymnal*, #384.

“Your Love is Amazing”, CCLI #2678212.

# 1

Copy this section for the Gathering Time leader.

**Gathering Time:** (Suggested time: 15 minutes)

## Receiving People As God Does

### Focal Text

Acts 15:1-22

### Background Text

Acts 13:1-15:35

### Main Idea

The meeting at Jerusalem affirmed the gospel message of salvation for all people, by grace through faith, asking only that Gentile Christians avoid acts that would hinder fellowship.

### Questions to Explore

1. What additional requirements do we sometimes attempt to place on the way of salvation?
2. To what extent does the church extend fellowship to all people whom God receives?

### Teaching Aim

To lead participants to describe ways for increasing their willingness to receive people as God does.

### Gathering Together:

Sing together "The Bond of Love" (*The Baptist Hymnal*, 384)

### First Thoughts:

## We Are One in the Bond of Love

Today's lesson in Acts 15 is a clear example of how believers see things from different points of view. Both the Jewish Christians who felt that circumcision was essential to salvation, and Peter, Paul, and Barnabas, who advocated for the Gentile Christians to be accepted upon their profession of faith in Christ, truly believed they were right.

As we look back, from our perspective, it is easy to say that Jewish Christians were wrong. But at the time they were ardent defenders of what they had been taught since birth. The differences in opinion on both sides came from heritage, history, and experience. They were all good people. They simply needed to hear God's answer to their dilemma.

### **Closing the Gathering Time:**

We can sing “**We Are One in the Bond of Love**” easier than we can live it out. Think of your church family. Within your group various age groups, economic situations, educational achievements, political beliefs, and life experiences, will be present. These differences can strengthen your church and its ministry—or weaken it. Like the early church, we need to hear God's answer to our dilemmas.

Today's lesson reminds us of the miracle of God in our lives that permits us to overcome these differences and truly affirm that we are “one in the bond of love.”

Take time at this point to mention **items of prayer concern** for the church, announcements of ministry or activities, and anything else that needs to be shared with or by the congregation. Pray for these needs. Remember to praise God in prayer.

Break time! Take five minutes between sessions. Encourage children to use the washroom so that they won't need to leave during the Bible Study time.

Distribute youth/adult Bible study outlines or paper for note-taking, if available.

Also hand out the activity sheets for preschool and younger children to use during Bible Study and/or worship.

# 2

Copy this section for the Bible Study leader.

Note to the Bible Study Leader: Suggested teaching time for the Bible study should be about 35 minutes. Use the Teacher Preparation for your personal study during the week before the session. Use the Bible Study Plan for the actual session.

## Teacher Preparation

### Receiving People As God Does

#### **Focal Text**

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#### **Background Text**

Acts 13:1-15:35

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#### **Questions to Explore**

1. What additional requirements do we sometimes attempt to place on the way of salvation?
2. To what extent does the church extend fellowship to all people whom God receives?

#### **Teaching Aim**

To lead participants to describe ways for increasing their willingness to receive people as God does.

### Introduction to Your Personal Study

Many years ago my wife and I moved into an old teacherage that the school board had bought several years earlier but had not used for a while. On our first trip to the there it was clear that the walls had been papered several times with very dark, oppressive-coloured wallpaper. It was evident that if we wanted to do a good job on redecorating the house, that we would have to remove the wallpaper. With much work we got through the layers of paper that had simply been attached to the basic essentials of the wall—the drywall (sheet rock). Once we reached the drywall we could build on it. The house was soon transformed into a very pleasant home. As we examine chapter 15 of Acts we find that the Judean Christians once again were teaching that some additional

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action was necessary to be saved, and thus they were misleading the people of Antioch. Like the wallpaper, these extra additions to salvation were hiding the truth of God's love. Salvation must be preached as simply as Jesus did. Belief and confession are essential, and that is all.

## **Background:**

Acts 15 forces us to learn the basics of salvation. The ABCs of salvation are simple: admit that we have sinned; believe that Jesus Christ lived, died, was buried, and rose again for the forgiveness of our sins; and commit our lives to Jesus, asking him to be our Lord and Saviour. This beautiful transformation all happens because His *Grace* saves us.

## **Focusing on the Meaning:**

### **The Problem Is Posed (Acts 15:1-3)**

15:1 The churches that Paul and Barnabas founded in the Galatian countryside were completely made up of Gentile Christians. The churches in Judea were composed of a large number of Hebrew converts (formerly Pharisees). The Hebrew converts tried to impose their Mosaic background (a group that promoted the teachings of Moses) on all new Christians, but especially on Gentile Christians. The Judeans thought that the only way into the church was through the Mosaic system; and therefore, if you were not circumcised, you were not saved. This belief was a contradiction to what Peter, Paul, and Barnabas had been teaching.

15:2 Paul and Barnabas did not sit idly by; they entered into the debate quickly, stating words of testimony of what Jesus had done with the Gentiles. These men from Judea were not like the people you and I meet—who often deny the facts of the Gospel; they could not deny them because there were a lot of people around who had seen Jesus. These witnesses could testify to the resurrection. What these men sharply debated was the gospel and the interpretation of the facts. They had questions: “What do you need to be saved? What did Jesus do for you on the cross? and—Was it enough for you to receive salvation?”

These questions were important to the church in Antioch. The Antioch church sent a delegation to Jerusalem to gain information from the apostles who were in Jerusalem, and from James, Jesus' brother, their pastor. The Jerusalem church, at times, is referred to as the “mother church,” but there is no indication of superiority or control shown. The churches were and are independent bodies of believers who unite, at times, for a common goal. (An example of this unity is when they work together to complete a mission project.)

15:3 As the party from Antioch travelled, they visited with other converts who were Jewish and whose spirit contrasted with that of their nation. All were pleased to hear about salvation coming to their Gentile neighbours.

## **The Council** (Acts 15: 4-21)

15:4 The Jerusalem church leaders, the apostles and elders who were the pastoral leadership, welcomed the delegation with open arms. The brothers reported that the Gentiles had a leadership team that was responsible for overseeing the ministry of the congregation and who accepted the gospel (the ABC's) as it had been taught to them, and nothing else.

15:5 A group of Pharisees who were present wanted to add other restrictions to acceptance of the gospel. If you add things to the gospel you get religion, and that is not what God wants us to share. The gospel compels us to answer this question: "What are you going to do with Jesus?" It's not like buying a car; in some car purchases you buy the basics and then add to that. The gospel is clear: "Do you believe in Jesus? Will you repent of your sins?"

15:6-11 This passage details the meeting of the first church council. A church council is a meeting of the leaders of the church. This council met to decide whether God wanted a non-Jewish Christian to live under the same restrictions as a Jewish Christian. Peter allowed the debate to go on for some time before he entered into it. Peter states that the decision to accept Gentiles as Christians was already made. In approximately 39 AD, the church had already agreed to accept Cornelius (Acts 10:1-11:18). God had given the Holy Spirit to the Gentiles (Acts 10:44-46). If God made no distinction between the Gentiles and Jews, they reasoned, why should we?

It is important to remember that only God knows the state of man's heart. Thus any obstruction to receiving Jesus simply by faith must not be allowed. The council agreed that non-Jewish Christians do not have to obey all the laws of the Jews. It is important to see that the circumcision stipulation would impose an unnecessary hardship on the Gentiles. This action, if taken by the Jewish leaders, would not only test God, but also hinder the disciples from sharing the gospel. It was clear everyone believed they were saved by God's grace and not by works.

Unfortunately, there are still Christians today who want to "qualify" the experience of salvation. Jesus came to us simply by our profession of him as Lord and Saviour. The gift of Salvation is a gift of His grace. It is not through what we say or do, or promise to do. Acts 15:8 is very clear: "God, who knows the heart, showed that he accepted them by giving the Holy Spirit to them ...." I am so very happy that the morning I asked Jesus to be my Lord and Saviour, upon the confession of my sins, that God did not have a list of qualifying steps.

15:12 Barnabas spoke first because of his former, superior position in the church at Jerusalem; then Paul spoke. The men recounted their memorable experiences: lives that had been changed, cripples healed, a Roman governor converted, and the many who accepted Jesus Christ as they travelled from place to place. It was Barnabas' character that earned him the respect of the leaders in Jerusalem—thus giving him the



opportunity to speak first. This type of character should also be our goal as we go about our daily walk.

15:13-21 James, the brother of Jesus and a leader in the Jerusalem church, speaks last, ending the debate. James states his opinion. He supports it by referring to all the written material in the Old Testament when he uses the word “the Prophets.” Following this, James refers to the Septuagint (the most celebrated Greek version of the Hebrew scriptures) when he quotes Amos 9:11-12. In these verses God is obviously including the Gentiles among His people, and therefore denying that circumcision of the Gentile converts is a requirement.

### **The Ruling (Acts 15:22-29)**

15: 22-29 The apostles and elders (older men who exercised authority) agreed that no other burden should be placed on Gentile Christians in the matter of circumcision. James also stated that the Gentiles should become more sensitive about three practices that the Jews found offensive. The restrictions were for their good health—both physically and spiritually:

1. Do not eat meat offered to idols.
2. Do not eat meat of strangled animals and blood.
3. Avoid all sexual immorality.

James also points out that these minor restrictions had been preached since Moses. Sexual purity is necessary to live a higher moral life. The food guidelines would help the Jews and Gentiles to get along with each other and, in the case of strangled animals and blood, offer protection from certain diseases. The guidelines or requirements were not qualifications for salvation. They were common-sense actions that all Gentile Christians should follow so as to allow fellowship with the Jewish Christians as much as possible. As Christians we should stop all unnecessary actions that others find offensive—for the sake of fellowship and brotherly love.

### **Your Goal as the Leader of this Study:**

The Bible passage makes several vivid points which you, as the study leader need to emphasize to the group:

- ✓ We are saved by God’s grace alone.
- ✓ As believers we are to share the gospel of faith in Jesus Christ and place no other restrictions on it.
- ✓ Legalism can pervert even the ordinances of baptism and the Lord’s Supper, thus becoming a threat to the gospel of grace.

- ✓ A lack of unity can stop the spread of the gospel.

As you and I worship Jesus as Lord and Saviour, we must always look for actions or beliefs that cover the truth of the gospel and prevent Jesus from being seen. We must examine our inner reactions to people. We must not become obsessed with differences. We should not become offensive.

What actions must I do so that I can willingly receive people just as God does? The answer to this question will take study, prayer, and the teaching and conviction of the Holy Spirit. Let each of us start by examining our actions.

### **Time of Personal Reflection:**

- 1. What have I learned from this study?**
- 2. What personal experience does this lesson bring to mind?**
- 3. What is one action I will take this week to apply this Scripture passage to my life?**

## **Bible Study Plan** (Suggested time: 35 minutes)

### **Receiving People As God Does**

Regroup the church after the **Gathering Time** and break by singing a chorus that young children can relate to—or another praise chorus if your congregation does not have children. Children who go to their own Bible teaching session should stay with the group until after this song. Have the preschoolers and children accompany the hymn with rhythm sticks, maracas, bells, etc. Children who stay with their parents in the Youth or Adult study should have the material on worship as suggested in **The Children's Corner** at the beginning of this Unit of studies. (Ask your leader who downloads the studies for those suggestions).

Begin by helping the group locate the **Focal Text** in their Bibles. Also, share with them the **Main Idea** to be learned from the Scriptures, and the **Questions to be Explored** by the group.

#### **Focal Text**

Acts 15:1-22

#### **Background Text**

Acts 13:1-15:35

#### **Main Idea**

The meeting at Jerusalem affirmed the gospel's message of salvation for all people by grace through faith, asking only that Gentile Christians avoid acts that would hinder fellowship.

#### **Questions to Explore**

1. What additional requirements do we sometimes attempt to place on the way of salvation?
2. To what extent does the church extend fellowship to all people whom God receives?

#### **Teaching Aim**

To lead participants to describe ways for increasing their willingness to receive people as God does.

#### **Connect With Life:**

Tell the following story: There is a story about a person who purchased a home. The main living area was covered with an ugly, orange, shag rug. The new owner, because

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of financial restraints, lived with the ugly carpet on the living room floor for many years. Finally, in desperation, the homeowner tore off the rug and revealed a beautiful hardwood floor. Just as the former owner had covered the floor with a carpet, religion often hides the love of Jesus and the gift of salvation with extra with extra layers of requirements and other things. In today's lesson you will learn to search for and remove the "extras" that we might unknowingly have implemented, thus limiting the groups of people that we can reach for Jesus.

## **Guide the Study:**

Remind the group of last week's lesson about whether or not it was considered possible that Gentiles could become disciples of Jesus.

Ask: What did the apostles decide? (They decided that—yes—Gentiles could be saved.)

Then tell the group that this week's lesson discusses the next question: OK, then what is necessary for Gentiles to be saved? That is, **"What must they do to be saved?"**

Ask the group: Who were the Gentiles? Who are Gentiles in today's world? (Most of us, today, are Gentiles. Only Jews, whether Christians or not, are not Gentiles.)

Have a teen or adult to read Acts 15:1-3.

Lead members to describe a game that they like to play, and include some of the rules.

Question the congregation: If the rules are changed, is it still the same game? Try to get a brief discussion going using the same question regarding preparing a cake, or discussing your government, your family, etc.

Ask: What do we mean when we use the term **"irreducible"** principles, elements, ingredients, or concepts? (We mean the minimal things that cannot be changed without changing them—the item, concept, or whatever is under question—to something else.)

Share: Let's brainstorm what the basics of salvation are. Share with the class the ABCs of salvation.

Tell them: **Salvation is as simple as the ABCs. Admit** that we have sinned. **Believe** that Jesus Christ lived, died, was buried and rose again for the forgiveness of our sins. **Commit** our lives to Jesus, asking him to be our Lord and Saviour. This beautiful transformation all happens because His GRACE saves us.

Ask: Do you believe that these are all "irreducible elements? In other words, can any of these be omitted? For a child to be saved, does he or she need to understand these concepts well enough to truly accept them?

Confirm with the group: The answer to that question is a profound “Yes!” If these elements are irreducible, then they must apply to every person, whatever their age. A child is neither ready for, nor in need of, salvation yet until he or she understands sin, forgiveness, and repentance (understanding what it means to be sorry for sin and to turn from it).

Request another person to read verses 4-6.

Have the members give definitions for *apostles* and *elders*.

If needed, explain the terms to the group as follows: The **Apostles**, including Paul, were directly selected by Jesus to find, lead, and guide followers of Christ in their generation—except for the one the others drew lots for, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, to replace Judas Iscariot.

Ask: Why did the Apostles feel the need to replace Judas Iscariot? (The Bible does not say beyond what we read in Acts 1:16-26 where Peter leads the group to seek Christ’s counsel to choose a twelfth apostle. Most logically, it was to maintain the number “12,” which was symbolically very important to the Hebrew people, signifying totality. Jesus selected twelve men; therefore they should have twelve in the group. The New Testament writers spoke of the “twelve,” even when there were only eleven (John 20:24). There may have been other reasons.

Say: It is important for the way that we live and worship today as Christians that, after the naming of Matthias, the apostles never again selected another apostle, even after some were killed, or they died of other causes.

“Elders,” as it is used in the New Testament, basically refers to the pastors of a particular church. Sometimes the terms bishop, elder, and pastor seem to denote different functions of the pastorate—or pastor—while at other times the terms are used interchangeably.

Read (or have someone read) verses 7-12.

Have a member read a dictionary definition of *religion*. Ask: While there is a pattern to salvation (ABCs), do we enforce a ritual? Do we add qualifications?

Probe for what a person must do to have salvation?

And then ask the group to discuss the question: Are there any further steps or actions?

Seek and answer to this question: What does verse 11 say about the salvation of a Jewish person?

Then ask: Was it, or is it, any different in nature than for a Gentile? (No, salvation comes exactly the same way for any person—regardless of race, sex, time in which

they lived or will live, religious background, age, knowledge of the Bible, or anything else.)

Say: The discussion, during the church council meeting in Jerusalem, had been thorough. The Christian Pharisees on the one side had given their opinions. Peter, Paul, and Barnabas had also been given time to speak. Now, one more person would address the apostles, elders, and the followers of Jesus (referred to as the “multitude”). This person is called James.

Look for an answer from someone: Who was James? (This particular person was the half-brother of Jesus, and was His follower. He apparently convened the council meeting, having been recognized as the pastor of the Jerusalem church.)

Have someone read verses 13-21.

Ask, What is James’ opinion on circumcision with regard to the Gentiles? (James says that barriers such as male circumcision should not be placed in the way of salvation for the Gentile people. He implies that such things are a part of heritage or nationality, but that they have no place in a person’s or a people’s relationship to God.) Note that circumcision is not condemned in any way; rather, it simply does not relate to salvation for either Jew or Gentile.

List the guidelines for Gentile believers that James states should be put in place.

Now ask: What is his support for doing this? Do you think these rules were good?

Insure that members understand that these guidelines were suggested to allow freer socialization of the Jews, and Gentiles—and for their protection from outside slander regarding idol worship, their morality both individually and as a group of Christians, as well as for a protection for their health.

## Encourage Application

If you have two or more youth, this is the time to give them the **Youth!!! Take Ten** page and allow them to go away from the adults and apply the lesson by and for themselves.

Say: Sexual immorality must be eliminated from our lives if we are to be true ambassadors for Christ.

Ask: Were the suggestions that were made by James necessary for salvation? (No—neither for Jews nor for Gentiles.)

Have the group list actions that might prevent others from fellowship and even from coming to a relationship with Jesus.

Remind the group that we should pray daily to be more accepting of people and that all barriers preventing people from coming to the saving grace of Jesus be removed. Close by praying that each person would be willing to receive people as God does.

**Take a five-minute break to separate the Bible Study and Worship Time.** Children may need to use the washroom again before worship.

# Youth!!! Take Ten

## Bible Study Application for Youth

You may wish to move away from the adults for the final five to ten minutes of the Bible study and help each other as youth to apply the lesson to your own needs.

### Receiving People As God Does Acts 15:1-22

**A youth will lead the following activity and comments.** No adults need to be present. If possible, teens should take turns in leading the application time.

Adults often communicate unwritten expectations to youth. Sometimes youth feel that to be a Christian one must abide by all of these rules. Today's lesson has shown that the early Jewish Christians struggled to understand the rules of Judaism that needed to be continued in this new commitment to Jesus and those that were no longer essential.

The tension between the two—which rules to include and which to exclude—will always exist. We learn to be moral people by internalizing the moral values that we have been taught from early childhood. One of the tasks of the teen years is examining which of those values will serve one for all of life. Throwing out all of the values in an act of rebellion is not helpful. But going along with a belief system that you have inherited from your parents is not the best either.

A popular theory of teenage development is called "Stress and Storm." It refers to the ups and downs of teenage life and it theorizes that extreme ups and downs are a necessary part of teenage development. Other psychologists feel that adolescence, though a difficult time of life, is not inherently turbulent. Share with each other what you think. Is this true? Is it true for you?

Part of the difficulty does come from examining the teachings and values of your home and faith-community and from making them your own, or rejecting them. That's hard and serious work.

Pray that, as you are faced with moral choices this week, you will consider what God would have you do. What are the immediate ramifications of your choices? What are the eternal consequences?



**Worship Time** (Suggested time: 30 minutes)**Receiving People As God Does**  
**Acts 15:1-22****Beginning the Service:**

Search for a hymn or praise song that reflects the theme. Older choruses such as “People Need the Lord” or “Lead Me to Some Soul Today” are examples. Hymns such as “Whosoever Will” or “Room at the Cross” express the message that salvation is for anyone and everyone in the world.

**Offering:**

**Leader:** Ask the congregation to think of ways that we can use our resources to bring people to Christ—people who are different from ourselves in lifestyle, achievement, culture, or are outside of our personal reach. Pray that God will enable us to find ways to use our money, time, and talents to reach those people who we may deem “unreachable.”

**Praying for the World:**

If possible, let some other participant read the following:

Say: Most of the year, somewhere in the world, people suffer from war, earthquakes, floods, fire, political persecution, drug-related violence, and many other crises. Would some of you suggest such things that are happening today. Then we will pray for those persons who are suffering and those, both secular and Christian, who are in that place and attempting to meet the physical and spiritual needs of those people.

**Sharing Guide:**

This sharing guide is written to help the person who directs the worship time to bring the theme and Scriptures for the day to a conclusion. The leader may choose to follow the guide closely. Or, he or she may wish to only use it to give direction and a concept for preparing an original message. The leader may choose other ways to share the meaning of the worship experience.

**Wow! God Can Do Anything!**

## Acts 15:12

### Introduction

The whole assembly fell silent and listened to Barnabas and Paul describing all the signs and wonders God had done through them among the Gentiles (Acts 15:12). Even though they had walked with Jesus for three years and had witnessed his resurrection from the dead and ascension into Heaven, they were just now beginning to realize that God is not limited in any way at all. He can truly do anything, at any time, even after Christ's return to Heaven. God's miraculous work still goes on today to remind us of His power in our lives and in the lives of others. Listen to a story—a small example of God's work in today's world:

A young man was helping missionaries in the city of Guadalajara, Mexico. He was helping with some finishing work on the beautiful new student centre that had been built near the campus of the University of Guadalajara. He also was helping to start new Bible study groups and reach out to students on campus.

The missionaries shared with him the story of how the student centre was built. The property was bought years before—long before the university had been built. It was vacant for many years because money was not available to build on it. From time to time it had been used for church activities. One Christmas it was used to grow Christmas trees to help a church with its building fund. A contract for water service was made. Unfortunately, after Christmas came and went, nobody remembered to have the contract cancelled.

Ten or more years later, an enormous water bill was received for back bills that had never been paid. The missionaries almost despaired. It seemed that money for the student centre would never be available and now this bill had to be paid soon or the property would be confiscated by the Mexican government.

Several years earlier, the missionary wife had stayed with a family in the United States and had shared with them, and in various churches, some of the wonderful things that were happening in Mexican evangelical student work. The family raised purebred, prize-winning goats as a hobby and for milk. The family promised that if they ever made a profit from selling their goats they would want to share it for the student work program in Mexico. They laughed, however, and said there wasn't a lot of possibility of them realizing a profit.

Several years passed and, though the missionaries occasionally corresponded with those friends, nothing more was mentioned about the goats.

Christmas came and in the midst of the joy of Christmas was the worry; the water bill needed to be paid in the New Year and there simply were no funds for it.

On the day after Christmas, a number of Christmas cards were received. Among them was a letter from the friends who raised goats. In a general Christmas newsletter, the missionaries had shared about the predicament but had not mentioned a dollar amount. Their friend, Kay, wrote that they had received the newsletter while they were in the process of arranging (brokering) a sale of some of their goats. One cold and wet December evening they had to go from farm to farm to choose those goats that would be sold and get them ready for shipping. Each goat would need a numbered ear tag. They arrived—tired, wet, and cold—at the final farm. It would be a big job to clip the old ear tags and attach new ones in the cold. But as they selected the seventy-three goats, they realized that every number on the goats' old ear tags exactly matched one of the new numbers that they needed to give to the goats!

This amazing happening was made even more precious to the friends and to the missionaries by the fact that the buyer of the goats was the Mexican government. The friends wrote, "We are sending, as we promised many years ago, the profit from our goats. We are so glad to be a part of this amazing event and it gives us great pleasure to know that the Mexican government is paying its own water bill." When the missionaries looked at the check, they realized that it was written for exactly seven \$7 dollars more than the water bill (Seven was the old Jewish number that meant "completeness").

Shortly after this time, other extraordinary happenings made it possible for money to be available to build. It was actually a very small amount for such a big undertaking, but a semi-retired builder, of another denomination, felt called to build the building—for the sum available. Many volunteers—students, couples, and even one eighty-year-old grandmother—helped with the finishing of the building.

The young student, who was listening to this story, turned to the missionary and said, "Wow! You must believe God can do anything!"

Later, the missionary couple talked together and asked themselves why, after so many miraculous events, they still experienced times of discouragement and unbelief. For many years now they have encouraged one another with the words of that young man: "Wow, you must believe God can do anything!"

Paul and Barnabas came back to report to the believers in Jerusalem. They told the Jerusalem church that Gentiles from Antioch, Iconium, Derbe, and Lystra, had come to believe in Jesus, in; but, in all of these places, Jewish leaders demanded that Gentile believers conform to Old Testament regulations.

How could they have missed the miracles? Why didn't they see the signs and wonders? Why did they, like the missionaries, forget that God can do anything?

## **1. The Christian journey will involve difficulty.**

“It is necessary to pass through many troubles on our way into the kingdom of God” (Acts 14:21).

Barnabas and Paul retraced their steps to encourage the new Gentile believers to continue in the faith. They said, “It is necessary to pass through many troubles on our way into the kingdom of God.”

One of the most difficult things of the Christian life is realizing that some of the obstacles and hindrances we face will come from fellow believers. We are all products of the homes in which we were raised and the culture which surrounds us. All of that—plus our own intellectual and spiritual strengths and weaknesses—means that all Christians simply do not see things alike.

The dreams we may have for the furtherance of the kingdom may not resonate with the dreams of fellow believers—even, at times, with the dreams our best friends.

Satan wants to use this reality to discourage, disappoint, and defeat Christian believers. However:

## **2. There will always be those who share the vision with you.**

Chapter 14 and 15 of Acts is an account of ups and downs.

Some Jewish believers couldn’t accept the new way—the setting aside of the Jewish dietary and worship customs—but others did. In verse 3 of Chapter 15 we are told, “When they had been sent on their way by the church, they passed through both Phoenicia and Samaria, explaining in detail the conversion of the Gentiles, and they created great joy among all the brothers.”

There is no sweeter joy on this earth than the joy shared by Christians who together experience the wonders of God’s grace. We celebrate it every time we see a baptismal service—the symbol of death to the old life and resurrection to live with Christ in newness of life.

We celebrate it together as we teach children and preschoolers to know and love God. We rejoice in it when a teenager commits their life to ministry. We rejoice in it when a senior adult comes to faith, after a long life without Christ.

In all the details of living together as the church—meetings, preparing for and cleaning up after fellowship times, preparing meals for the sick, training members to start new churches, walking with the bereaved—we have the opportunity for joy. These, too, are signs and wonders.

## **3. God knows the heart.**

What a comfort it is to know that God knows the heart. When others do not understand us, God does. When we are tempted to judge another, we can remind ourselves that “God knows the heart.” Peter reminded the Jerusalem council of that after much debate over whether male Gentile believers would have to be circumcised. He said, “Brothers, you are aware that in the early days God made a choice among you, that by my mouth the Gentiles would hear the gospel message and believe. And God, who knows the heart, testified to them by giving the Holy Spirit, just as He also did to us” (Acts 15:7-8).

We live in a day when spiritually hungry people seek signs and wonders. Sometimes it is difficult for us to separate the amazing religious productions, those created with computer images and graphics, from a spiritual experience that is both real and genuine. We may have substituted flamboyant worship experiences for the true miracle of encountering God; nonetheless, we rest in the assurance that “God knows the heart.”

### **Call to Commitment:**

Let us seek to live in the presence of God so completely that we recognise His signs and wonders every day. May we learn the lesson of the missionaries and believe that God can do anything!

### **Concluding the Service:**

**Leader:** “Please bow your heads and bring alive in your hearts the promise of the psalmist for this day and this week”:

(Read): **“*Let the words of my mouth, and the meditation of my heart,  
Be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, my strength, and my redeemer.*”**

(Psalms 19:14)