

# THE FORMAL DECREE OF THE COUNCIL: THE GREAT DECREE ON SALVATION ACTS 15:23–35

## *Introduction*

The great decree of salvation issued by the early church should have settled the issue forever. There is no question: salvation is “through the grace of our Lord Jesus [Christ]” (v. 11). But some people still insist on adding to the plan of salvation. For this reason, the great decree of salvation needs to be proclaimed and taught time and again.

- I. There was the attitude that brought about the decree: humility (v. 23).
- II. There was the declaration of the decree: ritual and law are not necessary to salvation; the disputers were rebuked (v. 24).
- III. There were the men chosen to proclaim the truth (vv. 25-27).
- IV. There were the few rules that were necessary (vv. 28-29).
- V. There were the glorious results (vv. 30-35).

### **I. *Acts 15: 23 Attitude of Humility***

There was the attitude that brought about the decree — humility. The leaders, the apostles and elders, placed themselves on an equal level with the brothers of the church. There was no sign of exaltation or superiority or of exalting one’s position; no claim that they had the authority to speak for the church. They humbly declared that the decision was a decision of all the brothers. The oldest and best manuscripts read “the apostles and elders, brothers send greetings to the brothers which are of the Gentiles...” In this reading the apostles and elders were writing as brothers to brothers, placing themselves on the same level as the brothers among the Gentiles.

In either case, the point is well made. The great decree of salvation is based upon humility. Everyone involved, and in particular the leaders, including the apostles themselves, realized that they were humble recipients of salvation just as all other men were. They were all “brothers in the Lord.” They all stood on an equal footing, no one above another, not in the great decree of salvation. No one had the authority to *lord* it over another person, not in the area of salvation. Before the Lord, all men are brothers. All are saved alike, “through the grace of our Lord Jesus” (v. 11).

*Mat 3:14* But John tried to deter him, saying, “I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?”

*Mat 18:4* “Therefore, whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.”

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**Rom 12:3** *For by the grace given me I say to every one of you: Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment, in accordance with the measure of faith God has given you.*

**Phil 2:4-5** *Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others. Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus:*

**1 Tim 1:15** *Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners — of whom I am the worst.*

**James 4:10** *Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up.*

**1 Pet 5:5** *Young men, in the same way be submissive to those who are older. All of you, clothe yourselves with humility toward one another, because, “God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.”*

**Prov 29:23** *A man’s pride brings him low, but a man of lowly spirit gains honour.*

**Thought 1.** For an interesting study, take a concordance and look up the word “brothers.”

## II. **Acts 15:24** *Role of Grace, Ritual and Law in Salvation*

There was the declaration of the decree — ritual and law are not necessary to salvation. No matter what anyone teaches, no matter who they are or how influential they are, salvation is...

- “by the grace of the Lord Jesus” and by Him alone. Ritual and law are not necessary (v. 11).
- “by the miraculous signs and wonders God had done” and by Him alone (v. 12).
- by turning to God and turning to Him alone (v. 19).

The persons who taught otherwise, the false teachers, were strongly rebuked.

1. They troubled believers with their words. The picture is that of words heaped upon words, false words that *disturbed* (etaraxan), agitate and shake violently. But note: the false teachers proclaimed mere words, empty words, and the believers must always remember this. Salvation is by grace alone and nothing is to be added to it. God and God alone saves. A man either accepts God’s salvation or rejects it. It is that simple. Man can do nothing to earn salvation.
2. They *troubled* (anaskeuazontes) the believers’ minds. The word means to devastate, to plunder, to dismantle, to ravage, to wreck, to cause havoc.
3. They were never commissioned by the church. The message of the early church was declared:

**Acts 5:11** *Great Fear seized the whole church and all who heard about these events.*

**Rom 3:24** *And are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus.*

**Eph 2:8-9** *For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith — and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God — not by works, so that no one can boast.*

**Titus 2:11** *For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men.*

**Titus 3:4-7** *But when the kindness and love of God our Saviour appeared, he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Saviour, so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs having the hope of eternal life.*

Anyone who adds, “You must be circumcised [undergo a ritual] and keep the law: to [them] we gave no such commandment.”

Note how strong the rebuke was. The Judaizers or legalists (then and now, through all generations) were strongly rebuked. Paul went even further and warned:

**Gal 1:6-9** *I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you by the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel — which is really no gospel at all. Evidently some people are throwing you into confusion and are trying to pervert the gospel of Christ. But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other than the one we preached to you, let him be eternally condemned! As we have already said, so now I say again: If anybody is preaching to you a gospel other than what you accepted, let him be eternally condemned!*

**1 Tim 4:1-2** *The Spirit clearly says that in later times some will abandon the faith and follow deceiving spirits and things taught by demons. Such teachings come through hypocritical liars, whose consciences have been seared as with a hot iron.*

**2 Tim 4:3-4** *For the time will come when men will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear. They will turn their ears away from the truth and turn aside to myths.*

**2 Pet 2:1** *But there were also false prophets among the people, just as there will be false teachers among you. They will secretly introduce destructive heresies, even denying the sovereign Lord who bought them — bringing swift destruction on themselves.*

### **III. Acts 15:25–27 The Chosen Ministers**

There were the men chosen to proclaim the truth. Note what the church council did.

1. The church sent forth Barnabas and Saul as men who had proclaimed the truth. The Judaizers (legalists) had accused them of *having* the gospel, but they had not. They had declared the truth: salvation is “by the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ,” and they had risked their lives to declare the truth. Therefore, the church called the men loved.

**Thought 1.** The church should call all ministers beloved who proclaim the truth of salvation by grace. Men tend to *add* to salvation. The very nature of man desires to work, to have a part, to receive some credit. It is very difficult for man to confess he is depraved, totally unable to do a thing to save himself.

**Thought 2.** What the church needs is men and women who will risk their lives for the *name* of our Lord Jesus Christ.

**Mat 5:11** “Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me.”

**Mat 10:22** “All men will hate you because of me, but he who stands firm to the end will be saved.”

**Mat 16:24-25** Then Jesus said to his disciples, “If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will find it.”

**Mat 19:29** “And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or fields for my sake will receive a hundred times as much and will inherit eternal life.”

**Luke 14:27** “And anyone who does not carry his cross and follow me cannot be my disciple.”

**Acts 5:41** The apostles left the Sanhedrin, rejoicing because they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name.

**2 Cor 4:11** For we who are alive are always being given over to death for Jesus’ sake, so that his life may be revealed in our mortal body.

**Heb 11:24-25** By faith Moses, when he had grown up, refused to be known as the son of Pharaoh’s daughter. He chose to be mistreated along with the people of God rather than to enjoy the pleasures of sin for a short time.

2. The church sent out two supporters or advocates: Judas and Silas. These men were prophets (v. 32), worthy men, men gifted by the Holy Spirit; therefore, they were chosen by the church to go forth and declare the great decree of salvation. Note that the decree was so important that the written message was not enough. It must have exponents...
  - who “knew the writing,” the truth of salvation.
  - who could proclaim “the writing,” the truth by word of *mouth*.

**Acts 4:20** “For we cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard.”

**Acts 5:32** “We are witnesses of these things, and so is the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who obey him.”

**Acts 22:14-15** “Then he said: ‘The God of our fathers has chosen you to know his will and to see the Righteous One and to hear words from his mouth. You will be his witness to all men of what you have seen and heard.’”

**Acts 26:22** *But I have had God’s help to this very day, and so I stand here and testify to small and great alike. I am saying nothing beyond what the prophets and Moses said would happen.*

**2 Cor 4:13** *It is written: “I believed; therefore I have spoken.” With that same spirit of faith we also believe and therefore speak.*

#### **IV. Acts 15:28–29 Role of the Holy Spirit**

There were the few rules that were necessary. Note two significant points.

1. The Holy Spirit and the church were both involved in the decision. The Holy Spirit led and guided the church to declare salvation “through the grace of the Lord Jesus” (v. 11).

**John 16:13** *“But when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all truth. He will not speak on his own; he will speak only what he hears, and he will tell you what is yet to come.”*

**Rom 8:14** *Because those who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God.*

2. The necessary rules were not given for the purpose of saving men, but for the believers’ welfare. By doing these things the believers *do well (en praxete)*, that is, fare well and experience good — love, joy, peace — both within their own hearts and lives and between themselves and other believers. (See note, pt. 4, Acts 15:13-21 for the four necessary rules.)

**1 Tim 5:22** *Do not be hasty in the laying on of hands, and do not share in the sins of others. Keep yourself pure.*

**James 1:27** *Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world.*

**1 John 5:21** *Dear children, keep yourselves from idols.*

**Jude 1:21** *Keep yourselves in God’s love as you wait for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ to bring you to eternal life.*

#### **V. Acts 15:30–35 Salvation**

There were the glorious results of free salvation. When the four men arrived in Antioch, the whole church was called together and the great decree on salvation was read. When it was read, four great results occurred. Note how God took the dissension and its subsequent events and worked it all out for the good of the Antioch church and for the cause of Christ. The results were fourfold.

1. There was great *gladness* (*echaresan*): joy, rejoicing over the encouraging message (*parakleseis*), that is, over the encouragement and help given by the Jerusalem church.
2. There was great *encouragement*. Note that it was Silas and Judas who were encouraging and strengthening the faith of the Antioch believers. Note also the phrase “said much.” They encouraged for a long time, building the believers up more and more, assuring them of their faith in the Lord Jesus. They were saved by the grace of God and His grace alone, and the two visiting preachers wanted the believers to know that the apostles and elders of the great Jerusalem church strengthened the glorious truth.

**Thought 1.** There is absolutely no question whatsoever about the stand that the early church took on the great declaration of salvation: salvation is “by the grace of the Lord Jesus” and by Him alone.

**1 Tim 2:4-6** *Who wants all men to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth. For there is one God and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all men – the testimony given in its proper time.*

3. There was the discovery of the great missionary, Silas. The oldest Greek manuscripts do not include this verse (note the word “they” in v. 33). Some scholars feel it was added at a later date because Silas appears with Paul in Acts 15:40. There was, of course, plenty of time for Silas to travel to Jerusalem and report back to the church, and then to return to Antioch before Paul left on his second missionary journey. Other scholars believe the verse was in the original manuscript. No matter who is accurate, Silas and his great gift from God were discovered by Paul at Antioch, and apparently Paul invited him to join the great mission thrust. (See *Silas*, Acts 15:34.)
4. A great teaching ministry grew within the church. Note three striking points.
  - a. Paul and Barnabas were busy teaching and preaching. They were not idle.
  - b. There were many teachers and preachers in the church, and none of them were idle. They were all teaching and preaching.

**Mark 16:15** *He said to them, “Go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation.”*

**Acts 5:20** *“Go, stand in the temple courts,” he said, “and tell the people the full message of this new life.”*

**2 Tim 2:2** *And the things you have heard me say in the presence of many witnesses entrust to reliable men who will also be qualified to teach others.*

**2 Tim 4:2** *Preach the Word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage – with great patience and careful instruction.*

- e. The message they taught and preached was “the Word of the Lord,” not their own theories and ideas.

**Acts 9:20** *At once he began to preach in the synagogues that Jesus is the Son of God.*

**1 Cor 2:1-2** *When I came to you, brothers, I did not come with eloquence or superior wisdom as I proclaimed to you the testimony about God. For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified.*

**Acts 10:36** *You know the message God sent to the people of Israel, telling the good news of peace through Jesus Christ, who is Lord of all.*

**2 Cor 4:5** *For we do not preach ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, and ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake. ■*

### ACTS 15:34 SILAS

Silas became one of the great missionaries of the early church (see Acts 15:40). He was an outstanding believer; a disciple and a close companion of Paul. He was apparently a Roman citizen (Acts 16:37). Silas...

- was a leader in the Jerusalem church (Acts 15:27).
- was sent to Antioch to share the great decree of salvation (Acts 15:27, 32-33).
- was a prophet (Acts 15:32).
- was a disciple of Paul, joining Paul on his second missionary journey (Acts 15:40).
- was imprisoned with Paul (Acts 16:19-40).
- remained in Berea with Timothy to minister to the believers (Acts 17:14).
- was with Paul in Corinth (Acts 18:5; 2 Cor. 1:19).
- ministered with Peter, apparently after Paul's death (1 Pet. 5:12).
- is mentioned in the following New Testament books: 1 Th. 1:1; 2 Th. 1:1; 2 Cor. 1:19; 1 Pet. 5:12. □