

# Saved by Grace

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Text: Acts 15

Acts 15

The Jerusalem Council

[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.” [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. [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. [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. [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.”

[6] The apostles and the elders were gathered together to consider this matter. [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. [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. [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? [11] But we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will.”

[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. [13] 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,

[16] “‘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.’

[19] Therefore my judgment is that we should not trouble those of the Gentiles who turn to God, [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. [21] For from ancient generations Moses has had in every city those who proclaim him, for he is read every Sabbath in the synagogues.”

#### The Council’s Letter to Gentile Believers

[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, [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. [24] 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. [27] We have therefore sent Judas and Silas, who themselves will tell you the same things by word of mouth. [28] 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.”

[30] So when they were sent off, they went down to Antioch, and having gathered the congregation together, they delivered the letter. [31] And when they had read it, they rejoiced because of its encouragement. [32] And Judas and Silas, who were themselves prophets, encouraged and strengthened the brothers with many words. [33] And after they had spent some time, they were sent off in peace by the brothers to those who had sent them. [35] But Paul and Barnabas remained in Antioch, teaching and preaching the word of the Lord, with many others also.

#### Paul and Barnabas Separate

[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.” [37] Now Barnabas wanted to take with them John called Mark. [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. [39] And there arose a sharp disagreement, so that they separated from each other. Barnabas took Mark with him and sailed away to Cyprus, [40] 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. (ESV)

## The Main Issue: How is one to be saved?

- This passage before us is a pivotal moment in the life of the church.
- Its where the tide of the gospel emphasis shifts from predominantly happening in Palestine to going global.

- However, this presents a problem for some of the Jewish people in the church.
- While they may have been excited for the message of the gospel to be going to all the Gentiles, or all non-Jews, they began to confuse, or worse, distort, the means of their acceptance before God.
- And because there was this theological conflict, a council of the elders and apostles needed to be called in Jerusalem to determine these things.
- The specific question that the council of Jerusalem was called for was this – How is someone to be saved?
- Is it faith in Jesus atoning work on the cross?
- Is it faith in Jesus plus the OT rite of circumcision?
- Is it faith in Jesus plus circumcision plus keeping the law?

## What happens at the council?

- First, Peter speaks (verses 7-11)
- Peter refers to what happened to Cornelius (Acts 10) about 10 years earlier.
- God cleansed their hearts “by faith” – v.9.
- God gave them the Holy Spirit – v.8.
- There was no positional distinction between believing Jews and believing Gentiles.
- Peter concludes in v.11 – We are all “saved by through the grace of the Lord Jesus.”
- We are not saved by faith plus works!

For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, 9 not a result of works, so that no one may boast. Ephesians 2:8-9

## Why is circumcision such an issue?

- We know that the sign of the covenant in the OT was the sign of circumcision. On the 8th day all male Jewish babies were circumcised as a sign of their introduction into the covenant promises of God.
- It was a sign that they were a part of the covenant community of God.
- But that sign was done away with in the new covenant age. It was faith in Christ alone that saved, not faith plus works.
- They were saying without circumcision converts could not be saved - v.1. They were making circumcision a condition of salvation.
- Is faith in Christ enough? Is it sufficient for salvation? Or must we add to our faith, works? This was a foundational salvation issue.
- Are we saved by faith alone, or by some combination of faith plus our own good works? “...we know that a person is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ... because by works of the law no one will be justified.” Galatians 2:16
- These troublemakers were saying that without circumcision converts could not be saved!
- They were saying that faith in Christ alone was insufficient!

- They were claiming that they must add to their faith the work of circumcision. They were adding to the gospel.
- We are saved by faith alone. The gospel plus anything equals nothing! We cannot add Christ to anything for if you add to Him, you are not a part of Him.
- Either He is all our righteousness, or He is none of our righteousness. There's no middle road with Christ!
- If law-obedience becomes their system of merit, then they have no part with Christ!
- We cannot hold onto grace and still live by works!
  - Christ + Anything = Nothing
  - Christ + Nothing = Everything
- Any gospel that tells you that you have to add to it is no gospel at all! We are saved by grace alone!

## Issue of the Law -- James' proposal

“James agreed with Peter that they should not trouble the Gentiles with the ritual laws. But he knew that the Gentile Christians would have contact with Jewish Christians who still kept the ceremonial provisions, including laws about sacrifices, festivals, unclean foods and circumcision. He offered a proposal by which Gentile Christians could have fellowship with Jewish Christians and avoid giving unnecessary offense...Gentile Christians should abstain from certain things because in every city there are still Jews who observe these ceremonial laws and think them to be important. The first three requirements seem to be contextually sensitive and designed for these specific circumstances: abstention from food offered to idols, from blood (meat with blood in it), and from strangled meat (which would also have blood in it)...The fourth requirement, dealing with sexual immorality, was of course not a contextual or optional standard of obedience like the other three. It may have needed special emphasis and clarification because many Gentiles consciences were so corrupted that they did not hold to a high standard of sexual purity. This reaffirmation of the believers need to maintain sexual purity also serves as a reminder that the more standards of the OT still need to be obeyed.” -- ESV Study Bible

## Application

### 1. The gospel is THE matter of first importance

- Unity in the matter of “first importance” (I Cor. 15:3) was essential.
- We cannot move on from the gospel.
- We must not lose our grip on our justification.
- WE CANNOT BE SAVED BY ANYTHING BUT CHRIST!

### 2. Love others in matters of Christian liberty

- "What God commands should always be done." "What God forbids should never be done (see New City Catechism)."
- What about the areas that are not expressly commanded or forbidden?

- Where there is a degree of latitude and discretion needed, let us bear with one another in love.

## **Questions for Discussion/Application:**

- Re-read the text, Acts 15:1-40. What initial observations and insights do you have from reading this text?
- How were the Jewish teachers who had come to Antioch compromising the gospel? What were they saying the new Gentile converts had to do in order to be saved?
- Read the quote from the ESV Study Bible above in the Sermon Recap. Summarize in your own words what it is saying.
- Read Galatians 2:16.
- What does it mean to be "justified"?
- What does the Apostle Paul mean when he says we are "not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus."
- Why is it so important as Christians that we remind ourselves daily that we are justified by grace through faith -- not by *anything* that we do?
- In what ways can we more subtly, in our own walks with the Lord live as if we are justified by grace through faith *plus* other things?
- Consider taking time to pray, asking God to help us to live the Christian life, trusting in Christ alone and His righteousness alone for our sense of acceptance before God.