



## The Jerusalem Council, Part 2

*Series: Acts -- Worldwide Witness to the Worth of Jesus Christ*

Acts 15:3-35

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Let me again set the context for what we are going to be looking at today in the book of Acts. We have just been in Antioch. Paul and Barnabas have just returned from their first missionary journey. They have come back to Antioch and, together with the saints there, they are rejoicing in all that God has done through the preaching of the gospel, the outpouring of God's saving grace and the great number of Gentiles that have been saved. They are excited and rejoicing in the Lord together when certain men come down from Judea, claiming to be representatives of the church in Jerusalem, the Judaizers, and they pronounce to the Gentile believers in Antioch, that they are not actually saved because they have not been circumcised. They were saying that faith in Christ was not enough; that Jesus and His cross were not sufficient for salvation. Their gospel was not "repent of sins and believe in Christ" but was "repent of your sins, believe in Christ and be circumcised and keep the Jewish law as we interpret it. The issue was huge; it was a matter of salvation, of spiritual life and death. The peace and the unity in Antioch had been shattered by their divisiveness and their false gospel. Even Peter and Barnabas – once champions of grace -- were led astray into hypocrisy.

What we saw, as we looked at the background in Galatians 2:11-16, was one of Paul's greatest moments. How, in the power of the Holy Spirit, he stood firm against the lies of the enemy, forcefully calling Peter to repentance from falling away from the gospel, winning back the heart of Barnabas from straying away, and firmly established the central truth of the gospel – that salvation is by grace alone, through faith alone in Jesus Christ alone, without any mixture of religious works, human effort, or religious ritual. It is God alone, through the bloody atonement of Christ, who justifies sinners, saves sinners, forgives wickedness, frees from the shackles of sin, declares sinners eternally righteous with the righteousness of Christ -- and all of that by grace through faith in Jesus Christ that He creates in the sinner's heart. Paul, withstood evil and faithfully declared without fear and with absolute confidence – Christ is enough! He is more than enough! He is the author and finisher of our salvation and of all who are saved by faith...PERIOD.

But, remember that we saw, that this fight was still not resolved. It raged on -- heated, passionate, and intense. It became so heated, with neither side backing down, that Paul and Barnabas were appointed by the church in Antioch to go to Jerusalem and that's where we pick it up this week.

“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.” (Acts 15:3, ESV) As they are on their way to Jerusalem, Paul and Barnabas stop along the way at the churches in Phoenicia and Samaria, taking the opportunity to strengthen and encourage the churches there by describing how God had moved and blessed the preaching of His gospel. It brought great joy to the hearts of the believers there -- Hellenistic Jews, the Samaritans (half-Jewish, half Gentile), and the Gentiles. You can see the gracious hand of God in this. As Paul and Barnabas are on their way to the Council, still not knowing what they will find or what they are going to face, here is God, giving to his servants a beautiful picture of what unity in the gospel, of what unity in Christ should produce – great joy. I’m sure it was a great encouragement to these men. It is to me. How gracious of God to give them a momentary respite in the battle, to give them a glimpse of how gospel faithfulness really unites hearts. It’s awesome. They continue on to Jerusalem and at first they are greeted warmly, but it isn’t long until opposition raises its ugly head.

“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. 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.”” (Acts 15:4–5, ESV) At first the apostles, the elders, and the church as a whole received Paul and Barnabas with gladness. It is only when they begin to describe all that God had done through them in Galatia, opening the door of faith to the Gentiles, that things get testy. Some believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees rose up (the idea here is that they rose up in enmity or at least in opposition) and said, “It is necessary to circumcise them and to order them to keep the law of Moses.”

Now that word “believers” is problematic. Who are these guys? Are they the Judaizers, are they confused brethren? Most of the commentators that I read agree that this is a mixed group under the banner of “believers,” the same as we speak of the visible church as “the church,” all

the while knowing full well that the visible church is a mixed group of wheat and tares, of sheep and of goats. So what we have here are men who were former Pharisees who were professing faith in Christ. Some of them were sincerely confused brethren, still needing further council and instruction about how Christ had fulfilled the law, men who were honestly confused and still holding to the thought that one needed to become Jewish and be circumcised in order to be saved and needed further instruction to come to an understanding of the truth. But others were the Judaizers, that we looked at last week, who added to the gospel, whose teaching disgraced the worth of Christ, who rejected the power of His death and resurrection by saying that the atonement of Jesus was not enough, and who denied the very principle of grace – that salvation is a gift from God through His Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

So this is a tenuous situation. Before Paul and Barnabas even got to mention the reason for their coming to Jerusalem, a confrontation ensues. What now? Luke tells us, “The apostles and the elders were gathered together to consider this matter.” (Acts 15:6, ESV) This was a very serious matter, as we saw last week, right? And so the apostles and the elders get together to decide this very important doctrinal issue. Take note of this, because it is important. The men who were appointed by God to handle this serious doctrinal matter would decide this question, not everyone. It would not be determined by a democratic vote, not by congregational discussion or debate, but by the men God had appointed. And why? Because it would have degenerated into mob rule and though that may be the way it works in our society; that is not how it works in the church. It was not the place of all to discuss this, but it was a decision for the elders and the apostles to determine. Four men stand out in this discussion – Peter, Barnabas, Paul, and James.

“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. And God, who knows the heart, bore witness to them, by giving them the Holy Spirit just as he did to us, and he made no distinction between us and them, having cleansed their hearts by faith. 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? But we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will.”” (Acts 15:7–11, ESV) After there had been much talking, much presenting of sides and opinions – the Greek word used here for debate is a word that means “to express forceful differences of opinion without necessarily having a presumed goal of seeking a solution” – Peter stood up and says in effect – “Look, God has already decided this issue and He did it 10 years ago when I preached the word to Cornelius.”

Peter appeals to the acts of God in the past, acts that all of these men knew well. He says: 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. He tells them that God had already acted on this matter. By His sovereign will and choice, God had set Peter apart, by a vision and by the leading of the Holy Spirit, to go and preach the gospel, to act as God's mouthpiece, so that the Gentiles should hear the gospel and come to saving faith in Christ. This was no small thing. Peter was not seeking to do this. In fact, you will remember that Peter, at first, was reluctant to do so but he went under the compulsion of God. God ordained it.

And what happened as a result of his obedience? The Gentiles believed the gospel of grace. And God, who knows the heart, bore witness to them, by giving them the Holy Spirit just as he did to us, and he made no distinction between us and them, having cleansed their hearts by faith. God looked upon their hearts, the very hearts that He had regenerated and to which he had given saving faith in Christ and He cleansed, purified, and freed their hearts from the penalty and power of sin by faith in Jesus. And to show that there was no difference between the Jews and the Gentiles, He gave them the gift of the indwelling Holy Spirit – the proof of faith, the proof of acceptance with God, “sealed with the promised Holy Spirit, who is the guarantee of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it, to the praise of his glory.” (Ephesians 1:13–14, ESV)

God did not require of them certain works, did not require of them certain rituals, did not require of them circumcision, but accepted them as sons and daughters through faith in Christ. Peter's point is that God would not give His Holy Spirit to those who were still unclean in their hearts before Him. But He gave them the Holy Spirit through faith in Christ, just as He did with the Jews who had believed – Jews who were saved not because of their religious works but because of Christ.

His conclusion, then, was obvious -- 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? But we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will. Why are you putting God to the test by refusing to receive His revelation of a full and free salvation through faith in Christ? Why are you putting God to the test by questioning His way of salvation? How can you put on the Gentiles a yoke that our fathers and that we have been unable to bear? Make sure you understand what Peter was saying. That yoke, beloved, was not the Law of Moses. That was not the yoke. Look, salvation by grace is not opposed to the Law.

The Law acts as our tutor to bring us to Christ, to show us our need for Christ. The yoke to which Peter is referring is legalism – the idea that you can keep your interpretation of the law or perform religious rituals that can earn salvation and merit with God. That is the yoke, not the Law. The Law is good and holy, not a yoke. Rightly understood, it leads us to our Savior.

Then Peter says one of the most gracious things he could possibly say. But we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will. Why do I say that was a gracious statement? Here's why. As a Jew, Peter would have ordinarily said this the other way around. He would have said: "We believe they can be saved by the grace of Jesus, just like us." A statement like that would have put the Jews in a position of prominence. They can be like us. But that was the big issue, wasn't it. Gentiles did not have to become just like Jews, did not have to be circumcised and keep the ceremonial laws in order to be saved. So he turns it around and says, "We believe that by grace, only through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and nothing else – none of the ceremonial laws or our legalism that did not move us one inch closer to salvation because salvation is not based one iota in any goodness in us at all – only by grace can we be saved just as the Gentiles are."

Again, the point that Peter was making is that God would not accept as His own, by giving them the Holy Spirit, any who were unclean or had not been thoroughly saved by grace through faith. And the fact that God did, apart from the Gentiles being circumcised, only proved that salvation is by faith alone and not faith plus circumcision or any act of keeping the law. Circumcision and legalism, even religious knowledge, are not the way to a clean heart before God; faith in Jesus Christ our Lord, the Lamb slain for sinners from every tribe, nation, and tongue is!

You cannot help but hear the echoes of Paul's rebuke in these words of Peter that we saw last week in Galatians 2:15-16, can you? "We ourselves are Jews by birth and not Gentile sinners; yet we know that a person is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ, so we also have believed in Christ Jesus, in order to be justified by faith in Christ and not by works of the law, because by works of the law no one will be justified." (Galatians 2:15–16, ESV) It shows us that Peter had truly taken Paul's words to heart. Paul's words had caused him to think about the truth that he already knew, to consider against the truth that had saved him, and it resulted in a renewed heart that held steadfastly to the gospel, as he ought. These are the last words that we hear from Peter in the Book of Acts and they are great ones to end on. Peter finishes his statement,

“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.” (Acts 15:12, ESV) The debate and the discussion came to a standstill. A hush fell over the meeting as a result of Peter’s testimony. Partly, I’m sure, it was out of respect for Peter but mostly it was out of the realization that God really had already decided this issue long ago. It was not truly up for debate at all. After Peter spoke, Barnabas and Paul took the floor. Barnabas is mentioned first, probably because of his prominence in Jerusalem, and their only contribution was to recount the affirmation that God had given to the ministry that they had done among the Gentiles – the signs and wonders God accomplished. Last of all, James stood to speak.

“After they finished speaking, James replied, “Brothers, listen to me. Simeon has related how God first visited the Gentiles, to take from them a people for his name. And with this the words of the prophets agree, just as it is written, “ ‘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, 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 known from of old.’” (Acts 15:13–18, ESV) James the leader of the Jerusalem church; James, the brother of Jesus; James the Just, as he had come to be known for his insistence upon and his devotion to holy and righteous living; this James seals the issue once and for all by appealing to Scripture. First, he says...

Simeon – that’s Peter’s Jewish name -- has related how God first visited the Gentiles (through Peter’s ministry), to take from them a people for his name. Do not miss the words he uses here. James is speaking in code. These words “a people for His name” were the words that were often applied to the nation of Israel in the OT to refer to them as God’s people who had been taken out of the world to belong to Him. What James is saying is that just as God had chosen the Jews in the OT to be His people, He had also chosen the Gentiles for that same grace. James was saying, “They are no different from us.”

And then to seal the issue, James appeals to the Scripture, to the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the OT. From the book of Amos, chapter 9, he quotes: “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, 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 known from of old.” For James and for the apostles and elders, this is definitive proof.

I will rebuild the tent of David that has fallen; I will rebuild its ruins, and I will restore it—that’s a prophecy of the resurrection of Christ, of His exaltation and enthronement over all after His atoning sacrifice on the cross. God would raise and exalt Christ 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 known from of old – following the resurrection and through the preaching of the gospel, the remnant, the chosen of God, would seek the Lord and all the Gentiles whom God had chosen for salvation in Christ.

Grasp the import of this moment. James, whom the circumcision party had claimed as their chief supporter, came down firmly on the side of justification by faith alone. Think about how important this is. Like I said, he was known as “James the Just” because of his emphasis on godly conduct and righteousness. We can see that in the epistle that bears his name. Only, here’s the thing, James was no legalist like the Judaizers. He believed in the power of grace through faith to change people’s conduct, to transform them and grow them in righteousness as the result of true salvation, but not as the means of salvation. God had spoken in the past of the salvation of the remnant of mankind through Christ and of the inclusion of the Gentiles and now he was bringing it to pass. Who could stand in God’s way? Then James renders his judgment as the chief elder in the church.

“Therefore my judgment is that we should not trouble those of the Gentiles who turn to God,” (Acts 15:19, ESV) No more talk about circumcision; no more talk about dead legalism, no more talk of additions to Christ; the way of salvation has always been by grace through faith in Jesus Christ, so no more talk, no more troubling those whom God has chosen for salvation. But he continues by saying: “but (we) 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. For from ancient generations Moses has had in every city those who proclaim him, for he is read every Sabbath in the synagogues.”” (Acts 15:20–21, ESV) Here’s what James was doing. He was telling the church that they must embrace Gentile believers as true brothers and sisters in Christ, standing in grace just as they were and, on the flipside, he was saying that the Gentiles should be careful to respect the consciences of the Jewish believers, to limit the expressions of their liberty in Christ for the sake of gospel unity.

The things that he mentions here are a mixed bag. First he asks that they abstain from eating meat that was offered to idols in the pagan ceremonies and then sold in the marketplace. That's easy enough. It would prick the conscience of some of the Jewish brethren to eat food that was offered to idols even though idols were not gods at all, so for the sake of love – don't do it. Second, he commands that they would abstain from sexual immorality. Now that is obviously a sin that none of them should be involved in, but coming from a pagan Gentile background in which ritual prostitution was a real problem, the idea is that they should once and for all forsake any type or hint of sexual immorality in order to avoid pricking the Jewish brothers' consciences. Then last, abstaining from what had been strangled and from blood was a concession to the Jewish dietary law that forbid those things. Again, no big deal if it meant preserving the unity of the gospel. The reason for these requests really was twofold, to first avoid giving needless offense to the brothers in Christ and second, to avoid giving needless offense to the Jews they were trying to reach with the gospel, since the law of Moses had a wide hearing, even in the Gentile lands to which they would go, a wide hearing even since ancient days. It seemed good to the church in Jerusalem and it seemed good to Paul who was representing the church in Antioch. Once gospel truth had been established, unity and the willingness to lay aside personal rights for the sake of the church's unity was no problem at all. What an amazing result to such a serious issue and it shows the great faithfulness of God to guide and bring to fruition the earnest seeking of the truth under the direction of the Holy Spirit, and to bring hearts together in gospel unity.

After the judgment of the Council, we read: "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, 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. 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, 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, men who have risked their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. We have therefore sent Judas and Silas, who themselves will tell you the same things by word of mouth. For it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to lay on you no greater burden than these requirements: 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."" (Acts 15:22–29, ESV) This is truly awesome. The church, having received the judgment of the elders



and apostles, is clearly satisfied with the results and together they determine that it would be right, would be in keeping with leading of the Holy Spirit, to send Judas and Silas, leading men and prophets to go to the church and Antioch and present the letter. The church in Jerusalem, having been bothered, James in particular, that men who claimed to have come from the church but who did not, had caused such chaos in Antioch, they determined to heal any rift by sending them men who truly had been sent from the church with its blessing. You can hear their collective heart in the way that they speak well of Paul and Barnabas, giving them the heartiest commendation anyone could receive calling them men who have risked their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. You can see it in the way that simply sending a letter was not enough, but they had to send men who communicate the same things that the letter said, expanding and expounding on what was written.

The result is beautiful. “So when they were sent off, they went down to Antioch, and having gathered the congregation together, they delivered the letter. And when they had read it, they rejoiced because of its encouragement. And Judas and Silas, who were themselves prophets, encouraged and strengthened the brothers with many words.” (Acts 15:30–32, ESV) When the church in Antioch had received the brothers from Jerusalem and the letter from the church, they were encouraged. Of course they were. They had been in a state of anxiety and turmoil about their salvation ever since the Judaizers had come to town and now hearing of the decision of the council, their hearts were filled with joy – the truth of the gospel that they had heard and received by faith, affirmed and encouraged by the Jerusalem Council.

And Judas and Silas, encouraged and strengthened the brothers with many words. What a difference from the wickedness and lies of the Judaizers. They did not stir up strife, but stirred up their hearts in the Lord. True communion in the Lord and in the gospel is a beautiful thing. I love it and I know you do, too. There is nothing like it.

“And after they had spent some time, they were sent off in peace by the brothers to those who had sent them. But Paul and Barnabas remained in Antioch, teaching and preaching the word of the Lord, with many others also.” (Acts 15:33–35, ESV) What a great postscript to one of the most tumultuous times in the Antioch church and in the gospel ministry of Paul.

So what should we take away from this? Admittedly this text is not as full of action and excitement as last week's text, but there are two things that I want to highlight for you as a result of this passage, two things that stick out.

First, there is no way to overstate the importance of believing, standing fast in and walking in the truth of the gospel of justification by grace through faith in Christ. There is always a temptation in the human heart, even a regenerate one, to forget or to assume the gospel. It is so essential that we keep before our hearts the truth by which we are saved. Christ bore the penalty of our sins on the tree. He bled and died, suffered the agony of God's wrath in our place, a wrath that we deserved, and gave to us His true righteousness in which we stand, by faith in Christ, and He did it not because of our merit, not because of our imagined goodness, not because of our religious striving, not because of our moral performance, but simply out of the great love with which He loved us, rebellious sinners though we were. Here is the good news that Paul defended, that the council affirmed, and that all of us who have had our eyes opened to the truth know with all our hearts -- "God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. Since, therefore, we have now been justified by his blood, much more shall we be saved by him from the wrath of God. For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, now that we are reconciled, shall we be saved by his life." (Romans 5:8–10, ESV)

I love what Jay Harvey says: We constantly want to justify ourselves before God, to be good enough without Christ. But God does not want us to trust in our goodness. He does not want us to make up for our past sins through present obedience. He does not want us to think that we are good enough to go to heaven by comparing ourselves to the Hitlers and Stalins of the world. Comparisons are useless when it comes to establishing righteousness before God. God crucified His one and only Son for our justification, and He wants us to trust in Him alone. When it comes to being justified, faith plus anything else is quicksand. The only ground for right standing before God is Christ Jesus grabbed hold of by faith.

Praise God the Jerusalem Council upheld gospel truth. As we come to Christ, with nothing to offer, but clutching by faith to Jesus' blood and righteousness, we are saved. Immediately our condemnation is taken away, we have spiritual life in the place of death and God receives us forever as His children. The sins that witnessed against us are blotted out forever, and we receive the robe of righteousness in Jesus Christ. Our standing with God is perfect; it cannot change because Christ does not change. Though we stumble and fall, though we may for time

sink into sin until the disciplining hand of God brings us back to him, we are secure in the righteousness of our Savior.

What is better than that? By grace through faith we are saved, and it is by that faith that we must live right now. That is why Paul says: “I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. I do not nullify the grace of God, for if righteousness were through the law, then Christ died for no purpose.” (Galatians 2:19–21, ESV) Paul refused to come back under legalism, refused to nullify the grace of God, but found his life in Christ, in trusting Christ and living by faith in the Son of God, abiding in Him, being transformed into His image, living out by faith in Christ’s power and in Christ’s life in Him, the holy commands of the Lord. Beloved, I exhort you – Believe the gospel of grace, and as those saved by grace, make full use of the means of grace given to you by Jesus. Continue to receive the Word, worship with the saints, pray in earnest, fellowship with the brothers and sisters, find you lives together in Christ and take the gospel of free grace to the world. Grow in faith and grow in grace.

For those of you who are still stopping short of real faith in Christ, let me ask you -- In what are you trusting to save you? In what are you trusting for the forgiveness of sins, for the assurance of acceptance with God, and for eternal life? I implore you now, by the mercies of God, be reconciled to God by trusting in Christ who has made the only way of salvation. Come to Christ now. Eternity is before you. Behold God’s infinite and rescuing love revealed in the sacrifice of his dear Son, and know that God is gracious, merciful, and willing to save sinners.

The second thing that stands out to me in this text is this. When a church and a people are united in the gospel, truly united in Christ, truly united in the heart of Jesus, the petty and the secondary are relegated to unimportance. Do you see that? When a people are united in the gospel, secondary issues that often cloud our vision or distract us, things that can separate us from one another and from what really matters, become inconsequential and unimportant. Where the gospel reigns, no one pushes their agenda, no one is out of sync with the whole, there are no factions, no party spirit, no selfish schemes, no sinful divisions, no persistence in hardheartedness, not when the central and defining and uniting principle of the gospel is at the forefront of their hearts and minds. Instead, grace abounds. When the gospel is first in my heart and mind, when it is first in the heart and mind of our church, we can lay aside our rights,

we can graciously limit our liberties, we can be like the Philippian church to whom Paul wrote saying “complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves.” (Philippians 2:2–3, ESV) When the gospel is foremost in the hearts of a people it is there that the description of Psalm 133 is found: “Behold, how good and pleasant it is when brothers dwell in unity! It is like the precious oil on the head, running down on the beard, on the beard of Aaron, running down on the collar of his robes! It is like the dew of Hermon, which falls on the mountains of Zion! For there the Lord has commanded the blessing, life forevermore.” (Psalm 133:1–3, ESV)

That is the power and blessing of the gospel, believed and lived out.

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