

Acts 15:1–35

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[0 : 0 0] Well, good morning, church. Good morning. All right. Cool. Today we once again get a chance to dive into the book of Acts as we have been witnessing over the last few weeks of our time in Acts.

What being and I dubbed the triumph of the word of God. From Jerusalem to Judea, Samaria, we have seen Jews become obedient to the faith.

And this triumph of the word has not just stayed with these Jews, but has extended to the ends of the earth. That being to the Gentiles as well as Luke has even now in what you just heard read began to record how the Gentiles are beginning to rejoice with great joy that this good news includes them.

Arriving today at chapter 15, which the center of Acts, the heart of Acts, as many say. Today, we are witnessing this morning a historical event, perhaps the greatest event in the early church post-resurrection.

So listen up. This council meeting in Jerusalem that would serve to show what in the world the presence of these Gentiles actually means for the Christian church.

[illegible]

I mean, imagine being a Jew, someone who grew up holding to the letter of the law, memorizing what you needed to memorize, understanding what you needed to understand, being a Jew of Jews, a good Jew.

And then along comes these two telling others who haven't gone through what you've gone through that now they get the full benefits of what you've gotten after spending years getting it.

I feel some type of way, too. Well, the gospel is going forth throughout the earth. And what's the gospel doing even in these 35 verses?

What's the gospel doing? I just want to highlight three elements that I think would encourage us even this morning. First of all, verse 1 through 5, I call it a growing dissension, a growing dissension amongst the church.

[3 : 34] For starters, you need to know that the gospel has never gone out without some sort of confrontation. The early church was always met with problems, naysayers, persecution.

Indeed, the gospel grows. And as it grows, there will always be some sort of dissension of some sort. The gospel always had haters.

The gospel always had trolls. In fact, that's one of the most unique identifiers of the gospel going forth. The fact that there's somebody that got something to say against it. The gospel.

Right away we run into opposition in verse 1 through 5. The growing dissension. These problematic people that have come in in very short few verses. Verse 1, some men from Judea.

And even in verse 5, some believers belonging to the Pharisees. These men came with two words. Everybody say two words. For the newly converted Gentiles.

[4 : 35] First of all, Gentiles must be circumcised according to the custom of Moses. Secondly, it is necessary for circumcision to happen for the Gentiles.

You see that in verse 5. In order for them to keep the law of Moses. Keep the law. Get circumcised. This emphasis of legalism on top of the grace that has already been preached.

Is meant to nullify the grace that has gone out. They were saying that Jesus gets you to Moses for salvation.

I mean, if you like music in here and you hear your favorite song and someone doesn't sing it well. It kind of means like, oh, it's not. You did the note. You did it weird. It's kind of what Hannah was talking about, right?

Oh, no, you did it differently. Think about the gospel. It's supposed to be your favorite melody. Somebody comes in saying a different melody. It's I'm pretty sure there's something wrong in that.

[5 : 43] Jesus gets you to Moses for salvation. Or the idea that there is no salvation outside of the community of Israel.

The men could come in to make some sort of caveat for salvation. It's nothing new. Peter even speaks about it later when he says that some folks have come in and they came in long ago.

And their condemnation is just condemnation is just condemnation is just or even Paul picks up in Galatians 2, 4 through 5. Yet because false brothers secretly brought in who slipped in to spy out our freedom.

That we have in Galatians 2, 5. That we have in Galatians 2, 5. That we have in Christ so that we might be yoked into slavery. Dissension over two factors. Circumcision and keeping the law of Moses.

Because the implication and the impact of these stipulations is that the foundation that Paul and the apostles have laid would be faulty.

[6 : 49] That's the impact. That's the stipulation. That's the implication. That's what is really coming up. That's the real issue. That what's been preached is not really actually it.

It would mean that the work of Paul and Barnabas was faulty. Even in verse 3, this unique call to the Gentiles is the reason that Paul and Barnabas made it their business to go and speak about what God had done amongst them.

Even further in verse 3, these Pharisees and Judaizers, if they're correct, there's no cause for the joy you see in verse 3. There's no cause for the joy we rapped about a few weeks ago.

And according to chapter 13, where the Gentiles are all rejoicing. There's no cause for all that if these Pharisees and Judaizers are correct.

There are very good reasons for dissension, ladies and gentlemen. There are very good reasons that this growing dissension was coming about because it was based on the lack of common ground.

[7 : 58] You would notice many reasons for the static, we call it static, the dissension that would arise between these two parties, between two parties in general.

You've probably seen issues between two people. Charles Xavier, Magneto, Batman versus Superman, Malcolm X, Martin Luther King, Israel, Palestine.

You've seen it throughout history, but I would say when it comes to the church, do not be fooled into thinking that our current cultural climate of acceptance or whatever the new hashtag is, is what the church is primarily defined by.

In fact, we're mostly defined by the fact that we're separated. In certain times we see these few verses of dissension grow because the truth isn't properly upheld.

Whenever something gets in the way of Christ, dissension should rise. Because the current standing or the current position isn't being held.

[9 : 18] Either someone is going above the line or below the line, but we know one thing for sure, they're not holding the line. It's why doctors, when they're looking through your nose passages, they're trying to make sure there's no obstruction so that the air can get through.

I had a tube go up my nose a few weeks ago to see if I had sleep apnea. And they say, look, man, if there's obstruction, you need to get surgery. Well, in the case of Paul and Barnabas, they're sent to Jerusalem to discuss this matter because apparently the clear passage of the gospel is being distorted or manipulated or obstructed.

Ladies and gentlemen, you are not exempt from dissension, from debate. From debate, the very life that you are supposed to lead as followers of Christ should breed the question or at least breed the controversy or the explanation of, particularly pertaining to, how does a just God justify sinners?

How are Gentiles brought in? And according to the question, the question is answered by the sacrifice of Jesus Christ.

But let me actually also put it in this way. If you are a professing Christian in this room and you haven't come in contact with a growing dissension in even your life where you would have to make your answer, particularly in the uniqueness of Christ, my question to you would be what part of the world have you made peace with?

[11 : 03] What part of the flesh are you OK with? The growing dissension means that there would also need to be distinctions made. Verses 6 through 21, there's a godly distinction made.

Take a look. Now, while in the flesh. We have a tendency to draw distinctions between ourselves, compare ourselves by ourselves.

Who's who and who's doing what. Within these next few verses, what you actually are seeing is how God distinguishes and what kind of distinction God makes.

A godly distinction or put more clearly, the gospel finds its distinction within the people that are called into the gospel. So upon arrival, Paul and Barnabas, the council meets and you see it there.

We are presented with two voices, James and Peter. Representing the apostles and the elders. Verse 7 through 11, Peter stands up.

[12 : 17] And he addresses the council. And he bases his words on his experience. He appeals to the common knowledge and a common understanding. First of all, verse 7, brothers.

Or words like, you know. Or even in verse 8, God knows. Peter's reminder is that the salvation of God has no distinctions, no respecters of persons.

It's based on the sovereign will of God. What you thought. Gentiles can walk freely into this grace because of God.

Peter, while he wasn't seeking to evangelize Gentiles, considers his vision earlier before entering the house of Cornelius as the spark to the Gentile movement.

An event that Peter and even Luke, our author, considers to be a distinctly theological way of explaining what God is doing.

[13 : 22] Or what God has already been doing for that matter. Providing the way of salvation for even Gentiles. I mean, check the language in verse 7 through 11. Verse 7, the Gentiles shall hear the word of the gospel and believe.

Whew. Or verse 8, God has given them the Holy Spirit as he did us. Or verse 9, God has made no distinctions between us and them.

I mean, you want to get in trouble. There it is right there. Verse 11, we believe we will be saved through grace of the Lord just as they will. According to Peter, God does not discriminate between Jew and Gentile.

And if this is true, then why would there be any need for a burden for these Gentiles? Or any further rules or regulations? Perhaps Peter is even echoing the words of Paul to him as he checked him in Galatians for his hypocrisy when dealing with the circumcision crowd.

Perhaps Galatians 2.6, where Paul says God shows no partiality. Whatever the case is, after silence, after listening to Paul and Barnabas, James steps up.

[14 : 42] I got something to say. And they all look at him. Verse 13 through 21, he addresses the council on the basis of the scripture. And we see James endorsing Peter's speech and affirming Paul and Barnabas with the help of scripture.

As he states the words from the prophet Amos. James isn't answering the question, how did the Gentiles get in? But he's also answering, what is God doing? Amos 9, 11 through 12.

But look down at verse 16 and 17. And this, 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. What is God doing? Well, he's calling an assembly to himself, a church.

Oh, and by the way, that church includes the house of David and the Gentiles. Amen. Well, what Judaizers and Pharisees miss is that while God is bringing both Jew and Gentile in, he is at the same time doing away with man-made distinctions of acceptance.

[16 : 09] So anyone who would seek to add some sort of barrier or stipulation is actually troubling the faith. Or put more clearly, they're actually enemies of the faith.

Burdening believers. Muddying up the path. Obstructing the pathway. A path that has already been made clear by the precious blood of Jesus.

So what's James's reminder of scripture is set out to amp us up for the understanding of what it means to be called. Do you understand that this morning?

What salvation actually looks like and the source of salvation in the world. And what makes salvation in the gospel so clear and so distinct is that it's about acceptance apart from whatever you think you can do.

It's based on faith. It's about faith. A salvation distinct from man-made righteousness. Salvation is something that man must receive and not achieve.

[17 : 11] It's something that is given and not gotten. Which makes James' final statement all the more sure in verse 21 and 22, or 20 and 21, as they are engrafted into the body, they share distinct values.

A prohibition mentioned in 20 and 21 serves to show the distinct way that the lives of believers are ordered and carried out.

In other words, the doctrine of salvation leads to a lifestyle as a result or further put as proof that you got this salvation. Or should I say the practice determines the position.

Let me ask you, what distinctions are you living by that determine your salvation?

This might be an easy question for some of us, but let me say it this way. What distinctions do you have for others upon coming into this salvation?

[18 : 23] Is what makes your faith distinct, is it based on your own knowledge or your own commitment?

Or is what you base others' faith on, is it filtered through some man-made variable? Americanism?

Baptism? Church growth model? Back in the day in black history, they met to determine if blacks even had souls to even be preached to.

And the one preacher said that, well, if they act a certain way, white he was referring to, then God will accept them. What do you have?

Maybe it's not that extreme, but what do you have that determines where your soul lies or what you would determine others are situated in?

[19 : 29] It is these words from Peter and James that are written down and sent to Antioch in lieu of the growing dissension. And because of this godly distinction, it is the content of this letter that is the cause for rejoicing and for gratefulness amongst the disciples.

So verse 22 through 35, we see these grateful disciples. Gratefulness is the result of the growing dissension and is the result of the godly distinction.

We see this gratefulness in the form of words in these last few verses as rejoicing or encouragement. Even in verse 35, where Paul and Barnabas are left in Antioch to continue preaching because we need to hear more of this, bro.

And we have seen this sort of ending throughout the book of Acts after every bad situation. Oh, and the gospel went forth. Oh, and many were added to the numbers.

Oh, and they rejoice. Grateful, joyful disciples as a result of God's word being preached. Are you grateful this morning?

[20 : 45] As the council comes to an agreement, a letter is sent off by the hands of Paul and Barnabas as well as Judas and Silas, verse 22. This letter would be the cause of joy amongst the Gentiles, amongst its hearers, based off the prophetic scriptures, the authority of the church.

Even in the opening affirmation in verse 23, you see it there. He says, brothers. He called us brothers. We in there.

Or even the climax in verse 28 and 29. As the meat of the whole letter, the readers know that not only do the apostles and the elders have an agreement, but you know what?

The Holy Spirit agrees. I mean, that's all you need right there. We notice in verse 28, even he's repeating the words of Peter in verse 10.

Don't put a yoke on the disciples. Ah, we're disciples. That circumcision or any requirement outside of God's work is adding a yoke or burden to the neck of disciples.

[22 : 01] That if the disciple of Christ has been freed in Christ, who are we or anyone to attach any sort of stipulation? Even more than the content of the letter, even more than that, the response of the letter by its readers, the rejoicing, the thanksgiving, the gratitude, the gratefulness over the fact that salvation is indeed by grace alone.

That it is actually and has always been faith that identifies the children of God. What identifies your faith? What identifies your standing?

That the practice of accepting the Gentiles without demanding a circumcision or keeping the law of Moses is done away with. And when looking at the very scriptures, these Judaizers uphold and claim it's affirmed.

Even us today have a tendency of the Judaizers to want to manufacture and makeshift our own. Salvation. Our own righteousness.

Our own way to salvation for that matter. What renders rejoicing in verse 31? Well, it was knowing that the burden of the law that none, not even the most zealous Jew could bear, would never need to be something that they would ever have to worry about again.

[23 : 33] For freedom, Christ has set us free. So stand firm and therefore do not submit again to the yoke of slavery. To be a disciple, a follower of the way is accompanied by gratitude.

In fact, it's the understanding that what has been given is undeserved. That the gospel of salvation means that your life can be lived freely, unhindered in joy.

For the Gentiles, a few minor stipulations concerning sexual immorality and idols and strangled meat, that's nothing compared to what they've gained in Christ.

We can do that. You mean I can just live for Christ and not have to worry about if I get it wrong? Per se. If you are here this morning and finding it hard to rejoice in the Lord or trying to find where your encouragement will lie, even in this life, I would point you to what the Gentiles would have been handling with the words sent to them.

That your life is not your own. It is hidden in Christ Jesus. That you're, that you were brought with a price. That all who are in the family of God receive the full benefits, the full reward, and the full inheritance.

[25 : 11] While the Judaizers and opponents of the gospel might question what basis you receive salvation, when they've been living it for so long, why do you get this?

The disciple looks at this amazing free grace as freedom to live. Amazing that you would even think of me and save me and call me your own.

Or as one writer said, if grace is an ocean, what? We're all sinking. Because if you today have believed and received this good news that Christ has forever canceled your debt, broken the barrier of dissension between you and God, and has marked you as one of his own, or should I say you are distinct because God has made you that way, that can never be taken away, then ladies and gentlemen, you have a reason to be grateful, to rejoice even now as disciples of Christ, and respond to him with a lifestyle of gratitude.

Or as the late, great West Side poet, Mama Brenda Matthews, used to say, somebody ought to say something, somebody ought to do something, somebody ought to feel something, or maybe you don't know her, but what about Albertina Walker, where she said, you ought to show some sign if the spirit down in you abides, because he who the Son sets free is free indeed.

Let's pray. Lord, your freedom, your grace, your love is amazing.

[27 : 13] And as we look within our own hearts, and we know the foreboding of our own hearts, we know our own waywardness, you know the depths of our hearts even more.

Yet it pleased the Father to crush him. And the Son was pleased to die a death that we deserve.

Lord, I pray that in that work that your Son has already accomplished on the cross, and is at the right hand of God interceding, I pray that we will live in that freedom this day.

In Christ's name. Lord, if you didn't want to invest in your family,