

# The Council at Jerusalem

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Preacher: Josh Van Engen

[ 0 : 00 ] I am the church counselor also for this church while you go through the transition.! And there we read this.

Now some of the men came down from Judea to Antioch and were teaching the brothers, unless you are circumcised according to the custom taught by Moses, you cannot be saved.

This brought Paul and Barnabas into sharp dispute and debate with them. So Paul and Barnabas were appointed along with some of the other believers to go to Jerusalem to see the apostles and the elders about this question.

The church sent them on their way and as they traveled through Phoenicia and Samaria, they were told how the Gentiles had been converted. This news made all the brothers very glad.

When they came to Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the church and the apostles and the elders to whom they reported everything God had done through them. Then some of the believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees stood up and said, The Gentiles must be circumcised and required to obey the law of Moses.

[ 1 : 30 ] The apostles and the elders met to consider this question. And after much discussion, Peter got up and addressed them. Brothers, you know that some time ago God made a choice among you that the Gentiles might hear from my lips the message of the gospel and believe.

God who knows the heart showed that he accepted them by giving the Holy Spirit to them just as he did us. He made no distinction between us and them for he purified their hearts by faith.

Now then, why do you try to test God by putting on the necks of the disciples a yoke that neither we nor our fathers have been able to bear? No, we believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved just as they are.

The whole assembly became silent as they listened to Barnabas and Paul tell about all the miraculous signs and wonders God had done among the Gentiles through them. And when they finished, James spoke up.

Brothers, listen to me. Simon has described to us how God at first showed his concern by taking from the Gentiles a people for himself. The words of the prophets are in agreement with this.

[ 2 : 35 ] As it is written, after this I will return and rebuild David's fallen tent. Its ruins will I will rebuild and I will restore it. The word of the Lord this morning.

Let's pray. Our Father in heaven, we thank you for these words that you've given to us in scripture. And Lord, I pray that whatever it is that you cause us to hear this morning, whatever it is that you put on our hearts through your spirit working in us, the words that come alive in us.

Lord, may they be your words and may your words accomplish in us what only your words can be. In your name we pray. Amen. Well, brothers and sisters in Christ, a lot has happened in the church since the days of Pentecost at the very beginning of Acts, including the scattering of the church, of course, after the stoning of Stephen the incredible conversion of the one who actually was in charge of the stoning of Stephen.

That being saw was turned into Paul. Now we skipped a bunch of what is in Acts, including Peter's missionary trips and including his vision to which Peter learned and proclaimed to the church that God does not show favoritism, but accepts from every nation the one who fears him and does what is right.

It is clear, declared Peter to the church, that God had given the same gift of the Holy Spirit to the Gentiles as he has given to us. And if that is the case, who could stand in the way of the gospel message going out to all who would believe?

[ 4 : 18 ] With the gospel, or with that, the gospel message was intentionally preached to the Gentiles as well as the Jews, and the mission field grew, and the church expanded and exploded,

actually, across the country.

And at that point in the narrative of Acts informs us that not only had Peter taken it upon himself to preach the gospel message to the Gentiles, but Paul too had by this time been sent out on his own missionary journeys, planting churches in places like Cyprus, Poseidon, Antioch, which is different than the Antioch in our text, Iconium, Lystra, and Derbe.

The Gentiles were filled with the Holy Spirit, and they were flooding into the church as God continued to make a way for the gospel message to go out, calling his people into the church, and it was a great time of church growth.

But there was a problem that was brewing. It had been bubbling under the surface for some time now, in fact. While much of the opposition at the beginning of Acts against the church was from the outside now, here in Acts 15, we see opposition that has been growing on the inside.

It had been bubbling up for some time now, and it all actually began when Peter received that vision from God, and that was approximately seven years ago. That vision with the animals on the cloth and the preaching of the gospel to the Gentiles.

[ 5 : 44 ] Ever since that day, the gospel message had been preached to the Gentiles, and it was a great thing. The salvation was being preached to the Gentiles along with the Jews, but there had been growing division in the church as to what exactly it meant now for a Gentile to be welcomed into the Christian community, into the Christian church.

What does that mean? One commentator wrote this. He explained it in this way. He said the Old Testament had given clear anticipation of the eventual Gentile inclusion, in some sense, within God's purpose.

But most Jews understood that this process of absorption into Israel was a process of absorption into Israel rather than as a fully authentic second people of God alongside Israel.

Thus, the Gentiles would join Israel within its boundary markers, the receiving of the covenant sign of circumcision and the submission of the basic requirements, social as well as ethical, of the laws of Moses.

To become a Christian would effectively mean then also to be in the process of becoming a proselyte Jew. It's the notion that the Gentile inclusion within the people of God would not include both or even either of those markers was very difficult for many and was to prove for some nearly impossible to accept.

[ 7 : 08 ] And with that begins chapter 15. But Paul wasn't confused by this matter.

In his letter to the Galatian church, which seems to have been written at about the same time as the Jerusalem council, Paul writes this. He says, I am astonished that you have so quickly deserted the one that the one who called you to live in the grace of Christ and you are turning to a different gospel, which is really no gospel at all.

See, evidently, some people are throwing you into confusion. They're trying to pervert the gospel of Christ. But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other than the one that we preach to you, let them be under God's curse.

You can skip through the letter of Galatians to go to Galatians 3. You foolish Galatians who has bewitched you before your very eyes. Jesus Christ was clearly portrayed as crucified.

I would like to know just one thing from you. Did you receive the spear by works of the law or by believing what you heard? Are you so foolish? After beginning by means of the spirit, are you now trying to finish by means of the flesh?

[ 8 : 26 ] And then in chapter five, it is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm then. Do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery. Mark my words.

I, Paul, tell you that if you let yourself be circumcised, Christ will be of no value to you at all. Again, I declare to every man who lets himself be circumcised that he is obligated to obey the whole law. You who are trying to be justified by the law have been alienated from Christ. You have fallen away from grace. And through the spirit, for through the spirit, we eagerly await by faith the righteousness for which we hope.

For in Christ Jesus, neither circumcision nor uncircumcision has any value. The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love. The Judaizers were insisting that a person needs to have faith.

Plus they needed to have faith in Jesus and everything that Jesus did for them. Plus they needed to have the works of the law of Moses also.

[ 9 : 33 ] But how can that be? Asked Paul. What exactly does a person gain from the cross if your salvation still depends upon your ability to do good works? Which none of us can do.

Not even our forefathers could do that. And yet this is what the circumcision group was insisting upon. Telling people that unless they were circumcised, according to the customs taught by Moses, they could not possibly be saved.

Consider for a moment what the sign of circumcision symbolized as a sign of the old covenant, says R.C. Sproul. It symbolized both the blessing of the law and the curse of the law.

On the positive side was that God has cut out from the masses of fallen humanity, a people that he has consecrated to be his own. But on the negative sanction that the Jews manifested in his body was this.

In his indebtedness to keep the law. The Jews were saying this. Oh, God. If I don't keep the law, may you cut me out of your kingdom just as I have cut off the foreskin of my flesh.

[ 10 : 39 ] Circumcision negatively pointed to the curse of the law and all who broke the law. And Paul, again in Galatians, says that if the ministry of Jesus, when he went to the cross, Christ became the curse for us.

That's what was symbolized by circumcision was actualized when God cut off his very son on the cross by pouring out his wrath for sin upon him.

Jesus was literally circumcision. Jesus was literally circumcised on the cross for us. And so imagine believing that Christ died for us, that he was cut off, that he was cut off for us, that he took upon himself the curse once and for all.

And we embrace that by faith. And then after embracing that and after living in that freedom, we run right back to get circumcised again, says Paul. What are you doing? Why would you do that?

Why would you embrace the reality of your freedom in Christ only to run back into the shadows? It's no wonder the teaching of the circumcision group drew Paul and Barnabas into such sharp debate then.

[ 11 : 43 ] Sometimes people in churches, they get wrapped up into the small little debates that simply quite aren't worth the fight, if you know what I mean. But this was worth the fight.

This is worth it. It is essentially the doctrine of justification by faith alone that is in dispute here. A doctrine which Luther often is attributed as claiming to be the doctrine on which the church rises or falls.

And finally, the church in Antioch sent Paul and Barnabas to Jerusalem along with the other believers to see what the apostles and the elders of the church might say about this question. What does saving faith actually look like?

Does a person need to be circumcised or not? Does a person's salvation ride on their ability to follow the laws of Moses or not?

On the final day of judgment, what will the reason be for your eternal destination with Jesus? Several years ago, those who were tied to the evangelical explosion asked that question of believers.

[ 12 : 47 ] 80% of believers gave an answer that had much to do with how much they were doing for the church. 80% of those Christians would talk about how they went to church.

Their church attendance was great. Or how they taught Sunday school. Or how they led Bible study. That's what was going to get them into heaven. Or maybe how much money they had faithfully given.

That church couldn't survive without me. I would suspect that many would point to their baptisms. Or their profession of faith, perhaps. And if that is your answer.

If your salvation rests upon these types of things. These works that you have done. You will perish. You will perish.

Because there isn't a single person outside of Christ whose righteousness will save him or her. Not one. If it were up to us. If it were up to our own unrighteousness.

[ 13 : 46 ] No one would be saved. All have fallen short. As it is written, there is not one who is righteous. Not even one. There is no one who understands.

There is no one who seeks God. All have turned away. They have together become worthless. Writes Paul. There is no one who does good. Not even one. Romans 3. So if our salvation depends upon our righteousness.

Which we do not have. Then we are cooked. As the younger people say. There is no way for any of us. That any of us would have any salvation.

What so ever. And if we are stopped at the entryway of heaven. And we are asked why Jesus ought to allow us into his heaven. We would have to respond. That he shouldn't.

Actually. Not if it is up to us. Not if it is up to us. Because the only reason. Any of us. Could possibly get into heaven. Is because.

[ 14 : 44 ] Jesus promised. That all. Who would have their faith. Kept in him. Would not perish. But have eternal life. That is it. The only reason.

Anyone can be assured of their salvation. Is because of the completed work. Of Jesus on the cross. And through his death on the cross. As our representative. All of our sin.

Has been completely paid for. 100% full stop. Nothing else is needed. No more is required. And that's exactly. What Paul and Barnabas.

And some of the other believers. Who came to Jerusalem. Were reporting to the church. How the Holy Spirit. Was being poured into the church. And with great effect. Not after. Not after they had been circumcised.

Not after they had decided. To follow the laws of Moses. But even before. Some of the believers. Who belong to the Pharisees. Stood up and said. Well all that's being said. Is well and good.

[ 15 : 40 ] And we rejoice. That Gentiles. Are being saved. And that God is working through them. But they have to be circumcised. They have to be following. The laws of Moses.

And you can imagine. How the murmurs. Began to rumble. Through the church. Through all those who gathered. Perhaps you've been in a congregation meeting. Where that's happened. Where a statement is made.

Perhaps controversial. And it sends rumbles. To the whole congregation. Or to class this meeting. Which we're having. Later this month. Or even synod. And suddenly. Everyone is talking amongst themselves.

Until order is restored. The gavel. Is hit upon the desk. The apostles and the elders. Met to consider the question. And after much discussion. Peter got up. And addressed the crowd.

I want you to listen carefully. Closely. He said. And I want you. Here. To listen to his last sentence. Because I'm going to guess. That you like me.

[ 16 : 36 ] May have missed. What he said. This is what he said. Brothers. You know. That some time ago. God made a choice. Among you. That the Gentiles. Might hear from my lips.

The message of the gospel. And believe. God who knows. The heart. Show that he accepted them. By giving the Holy Spirit to them. Just as he did to us. And he made no distinction. Between us and them.

For he purified their hearts. By faith. Now then. Why do you test God. By putting on the necks. Of the disciples. A yoke that neither we. Nor our fathers. Have been able to bear. No.

Now listen to this sentence. We believe. We believe. We believe. That is through the grace. Jesus Christ. That we are saved. Just as they are. Now what would we expect.

Peter. To have said there. Actually. Probably. How did you hear. How did you read it. If you didn't read it carefully. You might have read it. The wrong way.

[ 17 : 32 ] Because. Peter believes. That it is through the grace. Of the Lord. That the Gentiles are saved. Just as. The Jews are saved. He switches them around. We might have expected. Peter to say.

Well. We know that the Gentiles. Are. Are saved. Or that we are saved. Or that the Gentiles are saved. Just as we have been saved. Long ago. But instead. Peter switches it around. And says. We believe. Or we know. That the Gentiles have been saved. Or that the Gentiles. We are saved. Just as the Gentiles are saved. Right. We are saved. Just as they are saved. So he switches the order around.

Not what we might have expected. We the Jews. Are saved by God. Just as God. Has saved the Gentiles. Not through the law. Not through circumcision.

But by grace. And at that moment. Paul and Barnabas. Began to tell the stories. One after the other. The miraculous. Things. The signs and wonders. That God had already been doing.

[ 18 : 27 ] Among the Gentiles. And a silence. Fell upon the assembly. As they listened. The kind of amazed. And wondrous silence. That falls over a crowd. That leans in. To hear what's being said. From the podium.

Each person careful. Not to make even. The slightest sound. For fear. That it might keep them. From missing a single word. That was being spoken. Each word. Dripping. With God's amazing work.

To the Gentile people. And when he had finished. James spoke up. Brothers. Listen to me. Simon has described to us. How God at first. Showed his concern. By taking from the Gentiles.

The people for himself. The words of the prophets. Are in agreement with this. As it is written. After this. I will return. And rebuild. David's fallen tent. Its ruins. I will rebuild.

And I will restore it. That the remnant of men. May seek the Lord. And all the Gentiles. Who bear my name. Says the Lord. Who does these things. That have been known for ages. In other words. What we're seeing.

[19:23] Here today. Was God's plan. Since the very beginning. The prophets. Have long. Been talking about this. Even if we didn't. Quite fully understand it. Until now. And while the bulk.

Of the text. That James quotes. Is found in Amos 9. He could have. Just as easily. Quoted from. Zachariah 2. Verse 11. Or Zachariah 8. Verse 22. Isaiah 2.

Verse 2. 45. 20 through 23. Hosea 3. 4 through 5. 12. 15 through 16. In fact. There are some. Who suggest. That in particular.

Jeremiah and Isaiah. Were used. In composing. The opening. And the opening. And closing lines. That James quotes here. Which is commentary. That it's interesting. Because it reinforces. The idea.

That God is welcoming. And has been welcoming. The Gentiles. And it's not new. And it's not original. To one prophet. All of the prophets. Were in agreement. That this is a promise. That was made.

[20:18] Long ago. And only now. Is it finally coming. To fruition. And this leads. To the inevitable. Conclusion. Of the council. Where James continues. With this.

It is my judgment. That we should not make it difficult. For the Gentiles. Or returning to God. We should write to them. And tell them. To abstain from food. Polluted by idols. From sexual immorality. From meat. To strangled animals.

And for blood. From blood. My god. My god. My god. My god. is read in synagogues on every Sabbath. How much ink has been spilled over James' clauses at the end of this section?

We ought to address them. We had an entire synod dealing with sexual immorality and its effects on a person's salvation. Let me simply say this. James does not appear to be fixing a set of standard practices for the church in this moment.

But he does appear to be more concerned about cultural sensitivity. His clauses display a cross-cultural concern intending to bring harmony between two groups of people who are learning to live as one body. These two groups were enemies practically at one time.

[21:26] The most important matter however was that on this day the church declared itself free from the legalistic burdens of the law.

It affirmed that salvation by grace alone through faith alone. We are not saved by our works. We are not saved by our stellar church attendance by our dedication to teaching Sunday school or giving to the poor or helping the old lady across the street.

Our ability to tame our tongue or refraining from breaking the laws. We are not saved because we have been baptized. Though these things are good and right and though they may be a result of our salvation which all of our good fruit is those works are not counted toward our salvation because our salvation has already been paid in full through the blood of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. There is nothing left to pay for for those who are in Christ Jesus. Your salvation is complete in him 100%. No cap.

We are done with the blood of bulls and goats and the blood of Leviticus. We are done with all the types and shadows of what it was to come because what was to come has already arrived in Christ Jesus.

[22:44] So what are we to take from this brothers and sisters in Christ? If Christ has set you free you are free indeed having been forgiven completely in his blood.

You are no longer burdened by the things of the law nor are you threatened by it any longer. While those in Christ have been given hearts that strive to live according to his righteous commands breaking them does not cause a believer to be shaken or afraid.

Rather filled with the Holy Spirit we are led into repentance and gratitude knowing that Jesus his death on the cross has forgiven us of that infraction too.

And because of that forgiveness all of our sins we rejoice all the more and tell the story to everyone who will hear even to people who are not like us telling them the story of unmerited grace of God that has liberated you and has invited you into relationship with Jesus for all eternity.

And that my friends is blessed assurance. blessed assurance Jesus is mine Oh what a foretaste of glory divine Heir of salvation Purchase of God Born of his spirit Washed in his blood This is my story This is my song Praising my Savior All the day long This is my story This is my song Praising my Savior All the day long Heavenly Father we thank you for these words that you've given to us Lord what an incredible thing What an incredible thing it is that you've given us your word That you've given us that you've gathered us through your spirit that we can hear your word every single Sunday that the body of Christ may be manifest here in this place in a very real and powerful way [ 24 : 51 ] And Lord we pray that whatever we heard this morning that those words can change us in the only ways that you change us We pray this all in the name of your Son our Savior Jesus Christ In his name Amen