

The Name For All Nations

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[0:00] Well, it's true I don't have a hat or a tie. I also do not have a pet moose. Although, as I was listening to Wes and Peter, I was thinking that maybe for his decades of faithful service to the gospel, we might give Dan Gifford a new nickname.

Dan the Moose Gifford. What do you guys think? You think that would be a good one? And then maybe Aaron Reindeer Roberts. I think that those might stick. Well, it's fun to make up silly rules, but actually rules can have serious consequences.

And that's what we see in our passage today. Our story begins with so much joy and excitement as Paul and Barney share the good news of salvation and the excitement that they experienced in the success of their first missionary adventure.

And these guys, remember, these guys traveled more than 2,200 kilometers and they've just planted nine new churches. And in chapter 14, verse 27, it's summed up like this.

When Paul and Barnabas arrived and gathered the church together, they declared all that God had done with them and how he had opened a door of faith to the Gentiles. Praise God.

[1:13] So imagine how discouraging and frustrating it must have been for them when these other Christians come along and start criticizing their ministry. Some Jewish men came to Antioch and started teaching this.

Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved. So is this just a let's agree to disagree kind of situation?

Well, no, it's not. It can't be. Because this argument gets right at the heart of a very important question. How are we saved? How are we saved? Are we saved by faith in Jesus Christ's death and resurrection alone?

Or are we saved by Jesus and something else? Jesus plus. You see, these Jews from Jerusalem, they're teaching that Gentiles had to become Jews before they could become Christians.

Or to put it another way, you need Moses to finish what Jesus starts. And this is a pivotal moment in Christian history.

[2:16] The fact that we read the Bible today in English begins at the council meeting in this chapter. That's why Luke puts this pivotal moment right at the very center of his 28 chapter book.

It's a turning point, a watershed moment. What is this Jesus movement going to be? Is it merely a Jewish sect? Or does following Jesus mean belonging to a worldwide, multicultural, multi-ethnic family of God?

And there's only one way to solve a debate this momentous. Paul and Barnabas head south to Jerusalem, which was the center of the young church, and therefore the logical place to bring such a big question.

And Luke narrates the story like this. First, the debate in verses 5 to 18, and then the decision in verses 19 and 20. So let's take a closer look at the debate first.

Verse 5 summarizes the Judaizers' argument. But some of the believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees said, Do you see how this teaching undermines the gospel?

[3:32] The most beautiful words that a sinner can hear is grace. Grace. Grace is the undeserved, unearned, loving forgiveness of God, given to us as a free gift by faith in Jesus Christ alone.

I want you to imagine salvation like a math equation. These Jews are trying to change the gospel math equation from God's grace plus faith in Jesus equals gospel salvation.

They want to change it to this. Faith in Jesus plus works of the law equals salvation. It's very subtle, but do you see the shift there?

The question is, where does salvation come from? Is it a gift from God, or is it something that I earn? Do you see this subtle shift is to take Christ out of the center of the gospel message, and to

place us, ourselves, at the center instead.

And the church, therefore, needs its wisest leaders to respond to this tricky situation. And so there are two key witnesses called. First, Simon Peter in verses 7 to 11, and then the Apostle James in verses 13 to 21.

[4 : 49] And Simon Peter first then. It's been about 10 years since the events of Acts 10 and 11, when Peter was called by the Holy Spirit to preach the gospel to Cornelius, the Gentile, and his family, and they received the Holy Spirit.

And 10 years later, Peter reminds the council of three truths from his experience with Cornelius. First of all, that God chose Gentiles for salvation.

It's not Peter or anyone else. And secondly, God proved his love for Gentiles by giving them the same Holy Spirit that he gave the Jewish believers. And thirdly, God cleanses hearts inwardly by faith, not outwardly by what we eat or how religious we act.

And then Peter delivers that knockout punch. And he says this in verse 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?

Peter's saying we Jews have never been able to keep God's law perfectly. So why would we want to put that heavy yoke, that burden of the law, onto Gentile shoulders?

[6 : 00] It makes no sense. And friends, we must always ask one another the very same question. Are we making non-essential things seem essential for salvation?

Are we putting heavy burdens of behavior on new Christians that make them feel discouraged and hopeless about belonging to the church? Are we pushing Jesus out of the center and placing ourselves at the center of salvation?

And we must keep humbly asking each other this question and not allow that gospel math equation to get muddled. God's grace plus faith in Christ equals gospel salvation.

And the second key witness is the apostle James. And this is James, the half-brother of Jesus, who was known to all Jewish Christians to be deeply devoted to keeping the Jewish law.

He also wrote the letter in the New Testament that's named after him. If anyone could be trusted to uphold the seriousness and the priority of the law, it was James. So what does James say?

[7 : 04] Well, first of all, he commends Simon Peter's testimony of how God has blessed the Gentiles with his Holy Spirit. And then he takes the counsel into scripture. And this is the New Testament pattern for wise decision-making that we see here.

It's personal experience plus biblical revelation equals godly wisdom. And James quotes from the Old Testament prophet Amos, chapter 9, verses 11 and 12, where Amos declares that one day soon, God will send his Messiah, the son of King David, who will welcome the Gentiles into God's worldwide family.

And James points to Amos and he says, look, the scriptures are confirming Peter and Paul's experience. We can now be certain that God intends for the Gentiles to be full members of God's family without having to become Jews first.

So the debate is over. But what about the council's decision? Well, James gives his judgment or recommendation in verses 19 to 20.

And we didn't actually hear these verses read in the Bible play video. So let me read them for us now. Beginning at verse 19. Well, those commands from James might seem a bit random at first.

[8 : 37] Stay away from anything that has to do with idols. Avoid sexual immorality. Don't eat food that's been strangled or has blood in it. What's the connection there? But all of those commands relate to common pagan temple activities in the ancient Greek world.

So the meat that you would buy from the butcher, well, it often came from animals that had been used for sacrifices in pagan temples. And those animals weren't killed in a Jewish kosher manner either, I can tell you.

And all this meant that Jews could never sit down for a meal with Gentiles, even Christian Gentiles. And what about the sexual immorality that he's referring to?

Well, this sexual immorality that James has in mind is most likely the pagan temple prostitution that was perfectly normal in Greek culture. And it wasn't considered to be immoral or cheating on your spouse to participate in that.

But the Jerusalem Council wants all Gentile Christians to know that following Jesus means turning away from some culturally acceptable behaviors. So James commands these new believers to do

these things for the sake of the gospel.

[9 : 49] And also for the sake of their friendship with Jewish Christians as well in their cities. But what does this have to do with us today? Does it mean that I can't order my steak rare anymore?

Well, American preacher R. Kent Hughes, he suggests two very helpful principles that lie behind the Council's decision. And these principles will apply to us no matter what our cultural context might be.

So the first principle he suggests is this. As those who are saved by grace, we must never make secondary cultural traditions into primary requirements for salvation.

For us, this could be something like thinking that people ought to dress for church the same way that we do. Insisting on a particular musical preference for Christian worship.

Or expecting our children to behave a certain way before we're satisfied that they truly belong to Christ. And Hughes has a second principle for us as well.

[10 : 54] Because we are under God's grace, we gladly restrict our freedom for the sake of others. And for us, this could mean choosing not to drink alcohol around a friend or a colleague who doesn't drink.

Being more cautious about the media that we consume with our children and guests in our home.

Or joyfully offering to cook a meat-free dinner for the sake of a vegetarian guest.

And this chapter has pressed on us the biggest question right at the center of our life in Christ. How are we saved?

How are we saved? Are we saved by Jesus and something else? Or are we saved by faith in Jesus Christ's death and resurrection alone? Let us receive by faith the only gospel that offers good news.

Salvation in Christ alone. And then let us proclaim the essential gospel of grace. And ensure that we do not place non-essential burdens onto new believers or onto our children and youth.

[12 : 03] And may the Lord open a door of faith for his beautiful gospel of grace. Amen. Amen.