

Problem, Opportunity, Decision

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[0 : 0 0] Please sit down. If you're new with us, what we do now is we take out the Bible in the pew in front and we're going to open up to page 127 near the back, Acts 15, the passage Elaine read for us.

As you turn to Acts 15, I just want to say that every baby is a miracle and they are God's gift to us and there is a lovely moment in the baptism service where you hold the baby over the water and you're not sure what's going to happen and they're a great reminder that part of the reason God gives us children is to assure us that we are definitely not in control.

You get a little bit of that feeling from this passage in Acts chapter 15. I have never been mountain climbing. Bronwyn and I once climbed the grouse grind.

Those of you who are considering doing it, it's a complete mistake. Do not do it. You get too far up to go down and it's only vanity that keeps you going.

I've never climbed a real mountain and it's always struck me as a bit of a silly thing to do really. It's a great deal of effort for a very thin reward. It's not one of those sports like going to the gym where if you get tired, you stop the machine and go home.

[1 : 3 2] If you get tired as you climb the mountain, you have to keep going and when you get to the top, you have to come down. But those who've done it tell me that when you get to the summit, it's worth every step and I suppose we just have to believe that view of things.

Well, as we come to this chapter today, Acts 15, we come to the summit of the book of Acts. Everything since chapter 1 has been leading up to the summit, since the resurrection of Jesus.

And everything that flows out, everything that comes next in the book of Acts flows out of this summit. In fact, everything for the rest of Christian history comes from this.

And it has been a difficult and arduous climb for us. I think we began this over a year ago and although there have been some brilliant views along the way, the oxygen, I think, gets thinner and thinner as we have to keep moving.

And it's an enormously dangerous and difficult movement as the church climbs to this summit point in the book of Acts.

[2 : 4 1] The church itself could fall off a precipice and the gospel journey could be over. They could go in the wrong direction and find themselves in fatal danger.

This chapter is a test for the early Christians as to whether they believe how radical the gospel really is. It's a test as to whether the Christian faith itself is going to survive, whether you can become part of God's people just by faith in Christ or whether you have to become a Jew.

It's a test of whether Christianity is going to become God's great good news for all people, the whole globe, or whether it will be a sect within Judaism.

And if you look back at the end of chapter 14 in verse 27, I remind you that what God has been doing since chapter 1 is opening a door of faith for the Gentiles.

And God has had to move over massive obstacles, I say this reverently, including the early Christians themselves who would not take the gospel outside the Jewish faith. And then we've come to chapters 13 and 14 in this massive missionary journey and men and women have called out to the Lord Jesus Christ, complete pagans who'd never heard of the God of the Scriptures.

[4 : 03] Back in Jerusalem, not everything was happy. There is a group of people in Jerusalem who had come to Jesus Christ but who used to be Pharisees.

And they're not happy with this new gospel that Paul is preaching. So they go up to Antioch and then they follow him on his missionary journey. And at each church, after Paul and Barnabas leave, they go to the congregation and they say, believing in Jesus Christ is not enough.

You've got to fill that out by obedience to the law. Basically, you've got to become a Jew. You've got to go through the ceremonies. You've got to receive circumcision and Sabbath. And when Paul and Barnabas go back to Antioch and they hear about this, Paul writes a letter to the Christians in the Galatian province called Galatians, which you should read sometime.

And that's where our chapter begins. And there are three key issues in the chapter. And the first is the Christian mission. And I just want to read the first two verses to put them in your mind.

Some men came down from Judea, that is from Jerusalem, to Antioch and were teaching the brethren, unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.

[5 : 23] And when Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and debate, and I just need to point out that's a very polite English translation, dissension and debate, that this is open, loud fighting.

Paul and Barnabas and some of the others, the church in Antioch appointed them to go up to Jerusalem to the apostles and elders about this question. So imagine you're in Antioch.

And here is a delegation come from head office. Very impressive. Converted Pharisees. With the name, they say, we come from James. In verse 5 they're called a party of Pharisees, which I think is an oxymoron.

They come with very good credentials. And they manipulate, I think, or they take advantage of the humility of these new Christians and they say that what Jesus has done is brilliant, but you still have to go back to the law of Moses for it to be completed.

And Paul and Barnabas argue loudly, publicly, and fiercely with this. And I want to point out to you that we ought to be familiar with this strategy.

[6 : 39] If you have been with us since the beginning of the book of Acts, do you remember that when the early church began, the gospel went forward with joy and generosity and Satan's first strategy against the church was to try to come against the church with physical threats of violence and persecution and it didn't work.

And in chapter 5, when he found it wasn't working, what Satan sought to do was this. He tried to bring the conflict and the confusion and the division inside the church, into the interior life, of the Christian church.

And when, through the disobedience, you remember of Ananias and Sapphira. Now, the same thing is happening here. Chapters 13 and 14, the gospel has moved forward in the most remarkable and stunning way through Asia Minor for the first time in history.

And Satan is not a happy demon and so he throws physical violence and attack at the church. You remember the apostle Paul last week was stoned and left for dead in Lystra. But that does not work.

Jesus continues to open a door of faith to the Gentiles and so Satan uses the same strategy that he used back in chapter 5. He moves inside the church with false teaching and he creates terrible fighting and civil war and he shatters the peace and he shatters the harmony of the life within the church.

[8 : 11] Now, I think facing physical violence and persecution is a fearful thing. But division and discord and disagreement inside the church is far more discouraging and far more dangerous to true believers.

Because threats of persecution and violence do not touch the interior life of the church. In fact, throughout history they've often served to strengthen and to purify the church.

But when the very thing that is the basis of our unity and our harmony becomes the source of fighting and disharmony, it wounds us deeply and it gives those outside a reason to reproach the gospel.

Some of you may remember, you may have been there at the Essentials Conference in 2002 when Bishop Josiah Eduafiron, he's the Bishop of Joss in central Nigeria, which is one of the key points of conflict between Christianity and Islam.

He described something of the physical brutality of the violence and persecution that they had seen. He spoke about seeing the son of the warden of his cathedral beaten to death because he was a Christian.

[9 : 27] Last year I was in a meeting with Josiah and he looked at a group of us from Canada and a group of us from the United States and he said this. He said, your persecution is more difficult than ours.

I said, why? And he said, because the people who persecute you call themselves Christian and drink from the same cup. See, why are Paul and Barnabas making such a fuss about this?

Why can't they just get along? I mean, isn't this the same Paul who wrote to the young minister Timothy and said, I read these words, the Lord's servant must not be quarrelsome but kindly to everyone, forbearing, correcting his opponents with gentleness.

this is the same apostle who revealed that the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control.

The same apostle who writes to young preachers and says, you have to be an example of gentleness and kindness to all who hear you. What possible reason could there be for him to have such open, heated, and public debate?

[10 : 40] The answer is very simply, he sees that it is the gospel that is at stake. For if we have to obey the law to be saved, then salvation is no longer based on the death of Jesus Christ but on Jesus as well as on what we do.

And for Paul to hold his peace would be to betray Christ. Don't you think it would have been a terrible thing for those brothers and sisters in Antioch to have seen Paul and Barnabas in fierce open conflict with those who call themselves brothers and later in his life when Paul writes a letter to the Corinthians he says this was one of the hardest things he ever had to face.

And this is what always happens when false teaching is introduced to the church. It always brings with it division, disharmony, strife, and discord. You see there are two different ways, almost two opposite ways to destroy the gospel.

One way is to add to the gospel to say well Jesus' death is okay but you've got to add things to it. You've got to add certain behaviours or law. That's the gospel plus. But there is another way to destroy the gospel and that is to take away key elements of the gospel and that is the gospel minus.

And throughout church history the church has had to deal with both kinds of attack. And I say this just for those of you who are members of St. John's our current struggle is not with a gospel plus it's with a gospel minus.

[12 : 18] It is a new version of the gospel the gospel without repentance. It says not that God redeems us from punishment by the death of Christ it says God accepts you as you are.

Not that he washes you clean through Jesus' death and resurrection for a new life of holiness but that he affirms and tolerates us. A couple of years ago we as a family were camping around the Pacific Northwest and we got lost in Idaho.

We crisscrossed the Oregon Trail actually I thought the Oregon Trail might have been something to drive on but we were not allowed to. We came to a place called Hell's Canyon and this is what happened in Hell's Canyon.

A number of the Oregon Trail wagon trains came to a river called the Snake River. They were basically lost as well and there were people camped at Snake River who told them this was not the Snake River it was the Columbia River and that if you jumped on the river it would take you straight to Oregon and even to the coast and so they instructed these people and they dismantled the wagons and they made rafts out of them and put their children and all the possessions they had left on the wagons and sailed off down the river and round the bend to Hell's Canyon which is a terrible precipitous waterfall and not a single person survived.

And you see so it is for us as a Christian church and so it was for the early church. Jesus Christ has just opened a door for faith to the Gentiles. If Paul and Barnabas roll over on this if they accept some compromise measure on this the door of faith will be closed and the gospel will fall to the ground.

[14 : 08] And I think this example of Paul and Barnabas is a great encouragement to us. Why should we expect things to be different today? And I want to show you a cross reference. If you would keep your finger in Acts 15 and turn right a few pages to 1 Corinthians chapter 11 page 163.

What is God doing when conflict is brought inside the church? In 1 Corinthians chapter 11 verse 19 on page 163 we read this from the Apostle Paul.

There must be factions or divisions among you in order that those who are genuine among you may be recognised. there's one God there's one church there's one gospel and when the gospel is attacked it tears the church Satan's hand is to be seen.

What this is saying is that God overturns what Satan is doing and even through the difficulty and through the division God's truth shines more brightly and those who are those who are genuinely his are demonstrated to be true.

This is the difficult climb to the summit. I understand that near the top of Everest the last climb before the summit is incredibly risky.

[15 : 38] I think it's called Hillary's Steps and it requires a tremendous concentration and commitment. That's what's happening here. Nobody likes conflict least of all the Apostle Paul.

For him the gospel is at stake for him to be silent is to betray the gospel. The same is true for us and those who follow Jesus.

So that is the Christian mission and I wanted to spend more time on that and I want to move more briefly now secondly to the Christian gospel. And if you go back to Acts 16 from verses onward we come to the council of Jerusalem and in verse 6 we find not that the whole church gathers but just the elders and the apostles gather and as happens when Christians gather there are three speeches and you can read Peter's speech for yourself in verses 7 to 11 and basically what Peter does is he uncovers the key questions and he says you know I was the one who opposed going to the Gentiles it took God three visions before I'd even go and visit Cornelius let alone preach the gospel to him and when Cornelius and his family heard the gospel of Jesus Christ even though Cornelius is a Gentile they believed in Jesus Christ they had faith which had nothing to do with circumcision ceremonies and the law and then

God poured out the Holy Spirit upon them as though he was from heaven putting his finger down and saying these are my people they belong to me so Peter says in verse 9 God made no distinction between us and them but cleansed their heart by faith isn't that a great phrase I understand at the Pope's funeral that they had a lot of trouble trying to figure out how to seat the 400 world dignitaries and in a step that I just think is absolutely brilliant they seated them in alphabetical order well that I think is a picture of the gospel in a way as you see salvation comes to us not by how dignified you are or how important you are or what race or nationality you come from it comes by the action of God cleansing our hearts by faith in Jesus

Christ we are addicted to looking on the outside but God looks straight into our hearts and all the ceremonies and all the laws and all the obedience that the world can muster cannot cleanse my heart in fact the reason God gave those in the Old Testament was so that we might long for the Lord Jesus Christ Peter finishes in verse 11 we believe that we should be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus just as they will and when he says that we're at the summit it is a massive devastating blow to human arrogance where every creative human imagination that says we can make ourselves acceptable to God by what we do says that God has dealt with our deepest and most profound need not by anything we do but by the grace of our Lord

[19:11] Jesus Christ says there is one saviour for all humanity and we receive salvation by simple faith in him there is no high bar of morality for us to cross over there's no laws and obligations that we have to step over to receive the salvation in fact the bar is so low it's almost impossible to see it says we are all unclean we are all contaminated we all need a heart cleansing and there's nothing we can do but to receive it by grace if what Peter is saying is right it means that God is intent on taking people from every tribe and every nation irrespective of where they were born what they look like and not making them Jews but giving them the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ so that they will be converted and saved that is what it means to be a Christian that's what it means to be a Christian church there is a cleansing there is a salvation that is totally outside of us that we are incapable of creating and generating and what faith does is it takes that cleanness and purity of Jesus and receives it and makes it ours and if you diminish the gospel and if you detract from that faith it will lead to despair and death so what does the council do how do they make the determination what is their authority in this and I want to turn lastly to the speech that James makes in verses 13 to 19 if you just look at those verses it's very interesting even though the apostles had spoken what does James do he turns to scripture the experience of the apostles is not enough they turn to God's word written which remains this is the old testament it remains authoritative and the rule of God for the church and it's interesting they don't take a vote James makes the determination and the clincher for him is the scriptures it is because in the scriptures everything becomes clear and he quotes from the book of Amos to say that God's intention has always been to include the

Gentiles I have a number of friends who are contrarians they always say the opposite of what I think they're going to say even when I think they're going to disagree with me and they're a great gift I love them to pieces and in a way the Bible is contrarian see we are so weak and we are so perverse in our thinking that we need to keep coming back to God's word again and again and again we distort things and we need to be overturned and we need to continually be converted by the grace of God and the good news that is the Christian gospel thirdly and finally I just want to touch on the last two verses under the heading of the Christian life if we are saved by the grace of the Lord Jesus what does that mean if our hearts are cleansed by faith what does it look like and if you just turn over to verse 19 therefore my judgment is says James that we should not trouble those of the Gentiles who turn to God but should write to them to abstain from the pollutions of idols and from unchastity and from what is strangled and from blood for from early generations Moses has had in every city those who preach it for he has read every

Sabbath in the synagogue James indicates that those who come to true repentance and turn to God must be embraced as full brothers and sisters in Christ interesting that word turning is the same word as conversion in verse 3 in other words the gospel embraces every person but now it does not embrace and include every behaviour James outlines in very simple detail what the holy life will look like and you need to know that verse 20 has arisen has given rise to considerable debate among Christian commentators there are some who take these as just ceremonial recommendations so that James is saying to the new Gentile converts that they ought to respect the conscience of Jews around about them the only problem with that is the word unchastity sexual immorality which is not a ceremonial thing that means every kind of sexual expression outside God ordained marriage and we will come back to this next week but my view is that there are three prohibitions here and that they are all primarily ethical they're not random cultural predilections they are three principles for the

Christian life derived from God's law and they are no idolatry for the Christian no sexual morality from the Christian and no violence towards another human being but I'll show you I'll try and show you this next week it's no accident that when we come later in the New Testament and we read the book that the Apostle James wrote very focused on the idea that true faith always issues in a changed life and here in Jerusalem he says that true faith will touch on our relationship with God with our sexuality and with our relationships with others because you see the Christian mission and the Christian gospel and the Christian life are all one the unity of the gospel creates the unity of the church cannot be added to cannot be subtracted from and we receive salvation by turning to Christ and trusting in him and it leads to a life of holiness marked by the worship of the living God by sexual purity and by love of neighbor and we'll pick it up right here next week

Amen Amen Amen Thank you.