Grace in the Balance

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Preacher: Mike Scrivani

[0:00] Acts chapter 15.

So just as a reminder, Paul and Barnabas have returned from their first missionary journey! and they're back in Antioch, where the problem arises that needs to be addressed.
! And so I'm going to read verses 1, and then we'll go through this passage together. But some men came down from Judea and were teaching the brothers, unless you are circumcised according to the customs of Moses, you cannot be saved.
And after Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and debate with them, Paul and Barnabas and some of the others were appointed to go up to Jerusalem to the apostles and the elders about this question.
So being on their way by the church, they passed through both Phoenicia and Samaria, describing in detail the conversions of the Gentiles and brought great joy to all the brothers. 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.
[1:13] 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. The apostles and the elders were gathered together to consider this matter, 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.
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. 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.
[2:33] 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.

Therefore, my judgment is that we should not trouble those of the Gentiles who turn to God, but should write to them to abstain from 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 has read every Sabbath in the synagogues. 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.
And they sent Judas called Barsabbas and Silas leading men among the brothers with the following letter. 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.

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[3:50] 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. 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. 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. So at different times in church history, leaders from the church have met to debate and settle issues regarding the church's doctrine, what they believed and what they were to teach.
Those gatherings were called councils, and most of those councils meant to debate early on in the church's history. They meant to debate issues regarding who was Christ and what they should teach about Christ.
[5:12] So, for example, the Council of Nicaea convened in 325 A.D., and they met primarily to address a priest named Arius in his view that Jesus Christ was not an eternal being, but was created by the Father.

Opposing him was a bishop named Alexander and a deacon named Athanasius, who argued that Jesus Christ is eternal, just like God the Father is.
At that council, thankfully, they sided with Alexander and Athanasius because they were of the truth. Obviously, Scripture supported and attests to the deity and eternality of Jesus Christ, as they were saying.
But there is a legend regarding that event that began circulating way after this council finished their meeting.
And the legend is that as Arius was making his case, as he was saying that Christ was created, that he so enraged a man there that this man jumped up and went over and slapped him across the face, and that man was St. Nicholas.
[6:29] So, if you don't believe in Santa Claus, or if you do, watch out. Don't say anything bad about Jesus. Don't say any heresies about Jesus, or Santa Claus will come and find you and slap you across the face.

The next council occurred in Chalcedon in 451, And that council met to talk about, or again, to further clarify some things about the nature of Christ and the doctrine of the Trinity, very important matters.
There were at least five other councils besides those two that met during the first several centuries of the Church's existence. But of all those councils, and as important as those councils were, none of them were as significant as this one in Acts chapter 15, the Jerusalem council, which is described in our text today.
The council addressed the most significant question of all, and that question is, what must a person do to be saved? The council addressed a growing concern among Jewish believers with the inclusion of the Gentile believers in the Church.
Many of the Jewish believers thought the Gentiles who wanted to become Christians first needed to become Jews. They saw Christianity as the culmination of Judaism, and so they were of the mind that in order for someone to become a Christian, they first had to become a Jew.
[7:56] And they struggled to accept their Gentile brother and sisters in Christ because of the pagan religions that many of them came from, and they were finding it hard to treat them as equals, considering their background and the background that they had and the knowledge that they had of the Old Testament scriptures.

That seemed unfair to them, too, that they could come right in, these Gentiles, and be treated as equals. And so there was a problem that had been simmering.
The issue wasn't whether God wanted to save Gentiles, but how they were to be saved. Could they be saved without first becoming a Jew? That was the question that the Jerusalem Council met to decide.

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So the main idea for this study is that salvation is by grace through faith in Jesus Christ alone. That's what we'll see here. Salvation is by grace through faith in Jesus Christ alone.
And so in this council, it takes place really in three different scenes. And so the first scene is division. Division. The division of thinking that salvation is either by works or grace.
[9:20] You know, false teachers have always been a plague upon the church. The most destructive false teaching that has misled the most is the teaching that salvation is by human works, that we can earn our salvation, which obviously the Bible says we cannot.

Galatians 2.16, for example, says, 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.
But we wonder, why is salvation by works so deceptive and attractive to so many people? And what I think is that at the heart of sin is a prideful attitude and pride desires glory for ourselves.
But none of us can take credit for the salvation that we have received by grace through faith in Christ. The one who has truly been saved knows that they truly have nothing to boast of in themselves, but only to boast of Christ and what he has done for them.
But these men who came down from Judea carried their infection with them and came to spread their false teaching to the Christians who were in Antioch.
[10:46] And their message, as we see in verse 1, was this, Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved. And so right away their teaching was threatening the unity of this congregation, which could have resulted in a split.

Gentiles and Jews. And, you know, there are some things as a church that are worth dividing over. But there are other things that are not worth dividing over.
We had prison ministry a couple weeks ago, and in my sermon, Marsha was there, I said Michael Jordan was the greatest basketball player of all time, which he is. But afterwards, a lot of the prisoners and I, we had this conversation, and not all of them agreed.
Now, that would be dumb if that was, if I was their pastor and they were my church and we decided that, you know, we're going to split because we can't agree upon who the greatest basketball player is of all time.
So there are silly things that we should not split over, but there are important things that we will split over if it means that we would be preaching or believing a different gospel.
[11:55] We can't stand for those things. So imagine, if you will, that you're a Gentile, and you are. I think we all are.

So imagine that you are you, just living back then. You've been saved by grace, your faith alone, and Christ alone. And as you were, when you were saved, you were overjoyed by that, weren't you?
That God would be so gracious to you, a sinner. And then you begin to progress in your Christian life, but then all of a sudden these men come to your church, and they're telling you that your salvation is no good.
You're not truly saved. That would be upsetting to you, wouldn't it? It's kind of like maybe you've heard the story of a Catholic church. There was a priest who didn't get all the words right with his baptisms, and so now all those baptisms don't count anymore.
Could you imagine that? So, I mean, similarly, now these guys are coming in, and they're saying, you know what, you're not truly saved. You thought you were, but you're not, because you need to be circumcised first.
[13:07] No salvation without circumcision was the message that they were preaching. But thankfully, at Antioch, they had Paul and Barnabas, and being the good shepherds that those men were, they weren't having any of it.

And they stood up, and they defended the flock from these wolves, as we see in verse 2. And after Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and debate with them, Paul and Barnabas and some of the others were appointed to go up to Jerusalem to the apostles and the elders about this question.
And so I think one thing that we need to see here, and one thing that we can apply is that, you know, as Christians, we are called to love one another, and we are called to pray for our enemies, and we are called to speak the truth in love, but we are also called to defend the truth that the Lord has entrusted to us.

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And so Christians should not be pacifists when it comes to the gospel being under attack. If the gospel is being under attack, then we stand up and we speak against those who would try to pervert it.
So the church sent a delegation off to Jerusalem to settle this vital issue, which could not be settled by just one congregation. And we see in verse 3, so being sent on their way by the church, they passed through Phoenicia and Samaria, describing in detail the conversion of the Gentiles, and brought great joy to all the brothers.
[14:35] And so as they're on their way to Jerusalem, Paul and Barnabas were building support for themselves as they went. They were encouraged by the response of these other churches and the reality that salvation is by faith alone for both Jews and Gentiles.

And so in verse 4, 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.
And so Paul and Barnabas were sharing all the struggles they endured as they traveled throughout the Gentile lands in that first missionary journey, sharing the gospel and how many were saved as a result of that.
But they made certain here, as we see, to attribute that success to what God had done. You see, they're not saying, look at what we have done. This is what God has done.
God is the one who saves. However, not everyone was thrilled by their report. Some were appalled by the news that salvation had also come to the Gentiles, Gentiles who did not observe the law of Moses.
[15:44] And so in verse 5, it says there, 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.

It's interesting here is that this group in Jerusalem is identified as believers, unlike the other group that created the confusion in Antioch.
Though they believed, these former Pharisees in Jerusalem, though they believed they needed their doctrine to be reformed, by mixing human works with faith, they were nullifying grace.
I like this quote by R.C.H. Lensky. He said, To add anything to Christ as being necessary to salvation, say circumcision or any human work of any kind, is to deny that Christ is the complete Savior.
It is to put something human on a par with Him, even to make it the crowning point. Even if Christ be thought of as carrying us 999 miles of the way and something merely human be required for the last mile, this would leave us hanging in the air with heaven being still far away.
[17:03] Those who believe that a ceremony, like us for example, a baptism or taking communion or for some other denominations they do, confirmation, or a ritual like in the Catholic Church with confession or doing penance or all the other things they do, to think that any of that stuff plays a part in salvation means that you have denied the truth that Romans 3.28 says that a man is justified by faith apart from works of the law.

None of those things add to our salvation. None of those things are able to save us. The Pharisees in verse 5 made an argument similar but different to the false teachers of the Judaizers in verse 1. They did not argue that circumcision was necessary for salvation but that believers were still obligated to keep the law. And so to them, circumcision and keeping the law were not a means of salvation but obedience required after salvation.
They were still committed to the ceremonial law which had been set aside by Christ. They were convinced that Jesus was the Messiah who died for their sins and rose from the dead.
However, they were unwilling to let go of their customs. They were unwilling to let go of their traditions and their ceremonies as a way of life. So it appears that they were genuine Christians but had not yet realized the liberating truth that such ceremonies and rituals had passed away when Christ came and established a new covenant.
[18:38] As Colossians 2.16-17 says, Therefore, let no one pass judgment on you in question of food and drink or with regard to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath.

These are a shadow of the things to come but the substance belongs to Christ. And so again, legalism is powerless to save anyone and is powerless to even restrain sin from us.
The new covenant believers are freed from the unbearable burden of keeping the old covenant.
Yet, as 1 Corinthians 9.21 says, They are not without the law of God under the law of Christ.

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And so what we need to understand is that being in Christ does not give us license to do whatever we want, to sin however we want. A genuine believer desires to obey Christ.
A genuine believer wants to be like Jesus but they understand that their obedience to God, their obedience to the law is a result of their salvation.
[19:44] Because they've been saved, because they have been indwelt by the Spirit, they have a new set of desires. They want to please the God who has saved them. They don't do these things because they think that this is how they earn their salvation or this is how they keep their salvation.

So the first scene was one of division and now the next is debate. Debate. The evidence is presented here that salvation is by grace.
In verse 6, The apostles and elders were gathered together to consider the matter and after much debate, Peter stood up and said to them, So here Luke does not go into great detail about what these godly men were saying when they were pleading their cases, but he picks up with the decision that was reached as the congregation then gathered to hear it.
And that decision was first announced by Peter and then Paul and Barnabas and James, each expounding the truth that salvation is holy by God's sovereign grace through faith, apart from any ritual or law keeping.
The speeches these men gave constitute one of the strongest defenses of the truth of the gospel that we have in Scripture. Their speeches provide six proofs, six evidences that salvation is solely by grace.
[21:05] And so again, the first speaker is Peter. And Peter 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.

And so the first proof that Peter offers comes by way of a reminder of what God had already done, of what God had already recently done. This issue he's saying was settled years ago when God sent him, if you remember, to Cornelius and to his household.
And they were saved as a result of his preaching the gospel to them. Neither Cornelius nor anyone in that household was first circumcised or instructed to keep the law in order to be saved.
And we know from Cornelius that he was a God-fearing man. He was devout, but he hadn't heard the gospel. And he was God-fearing, but he had not been saved.
And so Peter's point was this. The legalists have no right to require something of the Gentiles which God had not required. The matter was already divinely settled.
[22:13] But he continues on with his second proof in verse 8. 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. And so here Peter anticipates the possible rejections that one might make to his first point. The Judaizers could argue that since Cornelius and the others did not meet their legalistic requirements for salvation, they couldn't have truly been saved.
So they could say, well, maybe you were wrong, Peter. You know, they couldn't really have been saved because they didn't get circumcised and they weren't following the law.
They didn't become Jews first. But Peter demolished that point by testifying that the Gentiles experienced the same phenomenon of the filling of the Holy Spirit that the Jewish believers had experienced on the day of Pentecost.
And that proved that they had truly received the Spirit, which affirmed that God made no distinctions between Jew and Gentile and that the Gentiles who received the Spirit were receiving it as an affirmation that their salvation was, in fact, genuine.
[23:24] And he continues his defense of the Gentiles' salvation by grace by saying in the rest of verse 9 that having cleansed their hearts by faith. So since the Gentile believers had been cleansed of their sins by grace alone, what more could the law or ritual add to that is what Peter is saying.

The issue of sin had been dealt with and justification had been granted. But he's still not done. He goes from the defense now to the offense.
So it's almost like, you know, a cornerback in the NFL who's on defense and he intercepts the pass. Now he's on offense, right? And he's ready to take the ball to the end zone and spike it in his opponent's faces.
And that's what Peter's doing here. It says, 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?

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But we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus just as they will. And so Peter's proof here is that the law was never able to save anyone.
[24:32] And so he warns the Judaizers of putting God to the test. It was not their place to question or to challenge God's grace in whom he chose to be gracious to.

It was foolish to put a burden upon the Gentiles that they themselves were unable to bear. As Matthew 23, 4 says, Jesus there says, Not one of Peter's listeners had been saved by the law. Not one of them had been purified of their sins by keeping the law or had received the Holy Spirit as a result of their keeping the law. And so Peter is asking, Why would you impose something on the Gentiles that hasn't worked for any of us?
Why would you do that to them and it hasn't worked for any of us? And so unable to contradict Peter's point, it says that all the assembly fell silent. It made his point. He had made it very well. Then it was time for Paul and Barnabas to take the stage with their proof. And in verse 12, it says, And they listened to Barnabas and Paul as they related what signs and wonders God had done through them among the Gentiles.
[25:50] The Judaizers had no such proof. They had no such miracles to present to support their position. God does not confirm false teaching with miracles.

A truth for the church today that we need not forget either. That God will not honor or testify to false teaching with miracles.
Because if he did, then COVID-19 would have been gone two years ago when Kenneth Copeland blew it away. Have you seen that? It didn't happen.
Or the guy at Bethel, Bill Johnson, who says that he has the power to heal people. But again, as has been pointed out, I know Tom's made this point a lot.
Then why aren't you going to the hospital? Why aren't you going to the people who are actually dying? And as others have pointed out, and he's got glasses on. You know, if you really have that healing power, then heal yourself of your bad eyesight.
[26:53] So anyhow, we must be aware of those people still today. Like Peter's proofs, the evidence of Paul and Barnabas was irrefutable. Their teaching that salvation was by grace alone was stamped with God's approval.

Then James gets up, and James speaks in verses 13 through 18. After they finished speaking, James replied, James the brother of Jesus, the half-brother of Jesus, the leader of the Jerusalem church.
Brothers, listen to me. And so James' point.
is to point out how the Old Testament foretold that God would save Gentiles. And he quotes Amos 9, verses 11 through 12 to prove that point.
The Amos passage speaks of the millennium kingdom of Christ and reveals that Gentiles will be saved just as Jews are saved. Without first becoming Jews or else verse 17 would make no sense.
[28:18] James' point is that the prophet said Gentiles will be in the kingdom without first becoming Jews. Therefore, there is no need for them to become Jews in the present age.

Peter began by stressing that Gentiles in the past were saved by grace alone. And James concluded that theme by showing that Scripture says that they will be saved by faith alone in the future.
And so, therefore, Gentile salvation in the present must likewise be by grace alone. And then the third scene is decision.
The decision. Conclusive proof resolves the issue. The evidence for salvation by grace presented during the speeches was conclusive.
Therefore, based on all that had been said, James, as head of the Jerusalem church, gave his judgment that they should not, no one should trouble the Gentiles whom God has saved.
[29:17] Keeping the law and observing rituals were not requirements for salvation. With the major doctrinal issue resolved, James turned to practical matters of fellowship.

He was concerned not only that the Jews not trouble the Gentiles, but also that the Gentiles not trouble the Jews. The danger was that the Gentiles, reveling in their freedom, would pressure Jewish believers to exercise that same liberty and then violate their consciences as a result.
And so, to forestall that, James proposed that they write a letter to the Gentiles ordering them to abstain from four practices. Things which were polluted by idols, sexual immorality, and from what is strangled and from blood.

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To needlessly make a showing of violating those Mosaic sanctions would destroy the credibility of the church and their credibility with unbelieving Jews who would be offended as a result of that, and therefore their testimony could potentially be ruined.
And so, he did not want them to practice and participate in behaviors that would damage their testimony to the world. To recognize the vital importance of the matter, leading men from the church were sent to hand deliver this letter as they accompanied Paul and Barnabas back to Antioch.
[30:39] The letter answered the doctrinal question and gave wise instruction on how to avoid rifts in the fellowship of the church. The reading of that letter and the report of the delegation evoked happy responses from the assembled group of believers.

First, they rejoiced. The confirmation that salvation was indeed by grace alone lifted a tremendous burden of worry off of their shoulders, especially the men.
They were encouraged and strengthened by Judas and Silas' words. Legalism produces neither comfort nor edification in the church.
What does strengthen and what does encourage the church is the knowledge that we are saved by grace through faith in Jesus Christ. And that message was continually preached by Paul and Barnabas as they remained in Antioch before another division would cause them to go their separate ways.
And that division we will get into next time. But for this time, the main point of application for us, I think, is this. There has always been and always will be only one way to be saved.
[31:51] There's always been and always will be only one way to be saved. And what is that way? Ephesians 2, 8 through 9. For by grace you have been saved through faith.

And this is not your own doing. It is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast.
And so, you know, perfect church attendance is something to be admired.
I mean, seriously, I think it is. Being a morally upright person is something to be admired, especially in a culture like the one that we live in.
But repeating a prayer or being baptized or participating in communion or even holding a leadership position in the church, giving your tithes and offerings, some of these things are good things, but none of these things saves anyone.
So again, what must a person do to be saved? Romans 10, 9 says it very clearly. Because if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved.
[33:09] And so I think for us today, we still have false teachers. We still have false teachings going around and many that have infected the church.

And we have a responsibility and an obligation to, like these men in Acts chapter 15, to stand up and to speak the truth, to defend the truth, to not allow anyone to pervert the gospel and to warn them of what happens if they don't repent and stop doing that.
So let's be those kinds of people that are bold and courageous. We speak the truth in love, but don't let anyone mess with the gospel of Jesus Christ that has saved us. Amen? All right. Let's pray.
Lord, we thank You for Your Word. We thank You for its encouragement. We thank You for its reminders. We thank You for how You use it to illumine our minds and how You use it to light our paths.
Lord, we know that at times in Your church, we can be divided over things that are foolish, things that are silly, things that rob us of our witness.
[34:25] But then, Lord, there are things that are absolutely important. There are things that we cannot step back from. There are things that, Lord, if it comes down to it, if the gospel is going to be perverted, if it's going to mean that we teach a message that is incompatible with Your Word, then, Lord, we must divide if necessary.

And so, Lord, I pray for our church, that we would be the kind of church that doesn't stand for that, and that we would be united in the fact that we know that we are saved by grace alone and Jesus Christ alone.
And, Lord, I pray for our denomination. Lord, I know that there are many things that are dividing our denomination right now that potentially could see it split.
And so, Lord, I pray for our leaders, that they would take an example from Your Word, and that they would do what is necessary to keep us united around what is true and what is right, that our light would shine brightly for You in a world that is filled with darkness, is in desperate need of hearing

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the good news that there is salvation through Christ alone.
It doesn't come through works. It comes through trusting in Him and what He has done for us. We ask these things in Jesus' name. Amen.

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