

# “Saved Through the Grace of the Lord Jesus”

## A Postscript to Sermons on the Book of Galatians

*Texts: Acts 15:6-29 (the whole chapter will be covered); Amos 9:1-15*

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What happened after Paul sent his letter to the churches in Galatia? We don't know what happened in the specific congregations receiving Paul's Galatian letter, but we do know how the church at large reacted to Paul's rebuke of the heretical movement we know as the "Judaizers." In Acts 15, Luke recounts what has come to be known as the "Jerusalem Council" when Paul, and the apostles Peter, and James, along with the elders of the church addressed the Judaizing heresy. This is one the most important turning points in the Book of Acts and goes a long way to help us see how the early church governed itself and dealt with heresy.<sup>1</sup> The Jerusalem Council reached complete agreement about the gospel Paul preached to the Gentiles—all people (Jew or Gentile) are saved the same way, by grace alone through faith alone, on account of Christ alone.

We know from Paul's Galatian letter, as well as the account we will discuss in this sermon, the Judaizers were dividing the church by misrepresenting the teaching of the Apostle James (in his epistle), and then pitting James against the preaching of Paul. The Judaizers claimed that James and Paul disagreed about how sinners are "justified" (or given a right standing before God), and that James was right, and Paul was wrong. What transpires during the Jerusalem Council goes along way toward reconciling James' prior statement in James 2:14-17: "*What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him? If a brother or sister is poorly clothed and lacking in daily food, and one of you says to them, "Go in peace, be warmed and filled," without giving them the things needed for the body, what good is that? So also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead,*" and Paul's seemingly conflicting comments in Galatians 2:16: "*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.*"

The Jerusalem Council was called by the apostolic church because Paul's first missionary journey throughout Asia Minor (Eastern Turkey) had been a huge success. Through the proclamation of the gospel, as well as through the demonstration of his miraculous power, God confirmed the still largely Jewish church's mission to the Gentiles. The result was a harvest of Gentile converts to Jesus Christ. But it was not long after that the Judaizers and "the party of the circumcision" took issue with Paul, insisting that Gentile converts live as Jews—they submit to circumcision, keep the Jewish dietary laws, and observe Jewish feasts. Gentiles must believe in Jesus but obey Moses, if they are to be justified.

The statements by James, the teaching of Paul, and the attack upon Paul's gospel by the Judaziers must be addressed if Jew and Gentile were to coexist in Christ's church. If there was to be clarity about the gospel, this fundamental question must be settled; "what place does obedience to the law of Moses and ritual circumcision play in relationship to the gospel of free grace and justification?" Are Gentiles to obey the law of Moses and submit to circumcision in order to be saved? If not, how are Gentile Christians to relate to Jewish believers within in the New Israel, the new society, the mystical body of Jesus Christ, which is the church, created by God himself, through the proclamation of Christ crucified?

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<sup>1</sup> F. F. Bruce, The Book of Acts, 282.

Most historians date the Jerusalem conference in the year A.D. 49, shortly after Paul had written Galatians. But the tensions which led to the council had been present for some time. By the time the Council of Jerusalem meets, the first missionary journey was completed with Paul and Barnabas staying on in Antioch (a city in southeastern Turkey). The sheer number of converts proved God was calling Gentiles to faith in Jesus. It also became clear that Israel's own prophets foretold in the last days (still hundreds of years distant when they wrote) the Gentiles would share in the promises which God made to Israel. In Genesis 22:18, God promised to bless all the nations of the earth through Abraham. The prophet Isaiah (49:6) saw a coming age in which the Servant of the Lord—who is none other than Jesus of Nazareth—will be a light to the Gentiles and will bring salvation to the ends of the earth. The prophet Zephaniah (3:9-10) revealed that in the messianic age, the Messiah himself would purify the lips of the assembled nations, and all of those gathered would call upon the name of the Lord. Zechariah (8:22) spoke of an age when the nations would assemble at Jerusalem seeking the Lord almighty. “Yes,” Israel's God will bless the Gentile nations. But he will bless those nations through Israel. The question now being answered is *how*.

Once the Pentecost of the Gentiles occurred in the household of Cornelius (as recounted in Acts 10:1-11:18—when the Holy Spirit was poured out upon Gentile converts just as he had been with Jews in Jerusalem on the Day of Pentecost), the success of first missionary journey indicated God blessed the practice of preaching directly to the Gentiles apart from any connection to the Jewish synagogue. Tensions increased between those Jews converted to Christ but who held tenaciously to their old ways, and those teaching that Gentiles need not obey the law of Moses and submit to circumcision in order to be justified. Add to this, the increased political tensions arising after the death of king Herod Agrippa in A.D. 44, and the situation was rife for confusion and controversy.

It is very likely that Paul wrote Galatians *before* the Jerusalem Council. As we saw in Galatians 2:1-11, Paul already encountered the deception of those he calls “false brothers,” who were spying on Gentiles exercising their freedom in Christ. These “false brothers” (Judaizers) were attempting to return the Gentiles to the status of slaves—presumably slaves to sin because of the attempt to be justified by obedience to Jewish rituals. Paul tells the Galatians (2:5), “*we did not yield in submission even for a moment, so that the truth of the gospel might be preserved for you.*” For Paul, this was a debate about the gospel—nothing trivial here. Those who sided with the party of the circumcised (the Judaizers), were teaching another gospel, which was no gospel. In doing so, Paul says, they came under God's anathema (curse) and had fallen from grace. Strong words.

The pressure exerted by these false brothers to deny that we are justified by grace alone through faith alone on account of Christ alone was so great that even Peter grew weak in the knees, momentarily caved into them, before being sternly rebuked to his face by Paul (Galatians 2:11-14). Now the leaven of the Judaizers had spread from Antioch to Galatia (to the north) and now to Jerusalem (south). What Luke records in Acts 15, is nothing less than the apostolic church confirming that the merits of Christ which alone justify are received through faith alone apart from works of the law (i.e. “good works”).

The controversy came to a head when a delegation of Judaizers arrived in Jerusalem from Antioch, teaching salvation was not by faith in Christ alone and seeking a hearing with the elders and the apostles. In Acts 15:1-4, Luke recounts how “*some men came down from Judea and were teaching the brothers, ‘Unless you are circumcised according to the custom 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 sent on their way by the church, they passed through both Phoenicia and Samaria, describing in detail the*

*conversion 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.”*

Apparently not convinced by Paul’s Epistle to the Galatians, nor his subsequent preaching in Antioch, the Judaizers sought a hearing with the leaders of the church in Jerusalem—where several apostles were present. The Judaizers flatly denied *sola fide*—the apostolic teaching that we are justified by the merits of Christ received solely through faith alone. Instead they were teaching that every Gentile convert to Christianity must believe that Jesus is the Messiah, but in addition, must also submit to circumcision as a sign of their obedience to the Law of Moses. According to the Judaizers, if you did not receive circumcision, you could not be justified.

Already on record where he stood on this, Paul along with Barnabas, again found themselves in sharp dispute with these false teachers. So Paul and Barnabas, along with others chosen by the church in Antioch, immediately headed south to Jerusalem so that the matter could be settled once and for all. Along the way, Paul and Barnabas visited the churches in Phoenicia and Samaria, encouraging the churches everywhere they went with first-hand accounts of how God was bringing salvation to the Gentiles, just as promised in the Old Testament. Reaching Jerusalem, they were warmly welcomed. Before the Jerusalem church, they reported to the apostles and elders all that God had done on their first missionary journey. The success of the preaching of Christ crucified among the Gentiles, provoked those who sympathized with the Judaizers to respond to what they felt was Paul’s incomplete gospel.

In verses 5-12, Luke describes the debate which resulted once the church assembled. *“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.”*

Although we have to read between the lines a bit, it is clear from Luke’s account that the Judaizers from Antioch found willing allies in the Jerusalem Church among some of the Pharisees who likewise embraced Jesus as the Messiah, but who also felt that Gentiles must be circumcised and obey the Law of Moses just as they had done. We don’t know if these converts to Christianity from the party of the Pharisees fully endorsed the idea that the Gentiles could not be saved *if* they did not submit to circumcision. But at the every least we can make an educated guess that they were worried about the threat of antinomianism; the idea being that if Gentile converts were taught free grace and justification *sola fide*, this created a situation in which people would simply say they embrace Jesus as Lord, but continue to live as pagans. This is the same accusation Paul answered in his Epistle to the Galatians.

Like most church meetings, it is not until there had been lengthy deliberations among the leaders of the church, likely in the presence of the whole congregation (“the whole assembly” is mentioned in v. 12), that Peter stood and addressed the Pharisees. Peter reminded them that he himself preached the gospel to

the Gentiles in fulfillment of God's command. The result was that God gave the Gentiles the blessed Holy Spirit at Cornelius' house, just as the Lord gave the Spirit to the Jews at Pentecost. The creator of all people made no racial distinctions between Jew and Gentile. The Gentiles' hearts were purified by the blood of Christ received through faith; a clear reference to the forgiveness of sins and justification. Not one of them was justified through obedience to the Law of Moses, or through submitting to circumcision. Peter is echoing Paul's rhetorical question from in Galatians 3:5— "*Does he who supplies the Spirit to you and works miracles among you do so by works of the law, or by hearing with faith?*" After Paul's rebuke of Peter, recorded in Galatians 2:11 ff., Peter, in the presence of the assembled church, affirms without equivocation the doctrine of justification by faith alone, not by works of the Law. The Judaizers stand condemned, not just by Paul, but now by Peter.

In verse 10, Peter makes a startling admission, describing the Law of Moses as a yoke the Jews could never bear. He asks, "why turn around and place the same yoke upon the Gentiles?" "No," says Peter. We are not saved through obedience to the Law of Moses. "*We believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will.*" Peter affirms *sola fide* and *sola gratia*. The Law does what God intended it to do—show us our sin and leads us to Christ. Apart from Christ, obedience to the law is a yoke none of us can bear.

Once Peter had finished speaking, Paul and Barnabas took their turn, telling the assembly about the miraculous things that God did during their first missionary journey. The church became silent, spellbound as they heard about the conversion of Sergius Paullus (Acts 13:6-12) and the judgment that befell Simon Barjesus who opposed the gospel. Paul and Barnabas recounted the story of the whole city of Pisidian Antioch turning out to hear the gospel, when Paul and Barnabas were thought to be Greek gods as a result of God's healing of a man who had been lame from birth. Perhaps they told of how there had been countless conversions, and how in opposition to Jesus Christ, the Jews stirred up trouble. If God did such wonderful and mighty things among the Gentiles, and blessed the first missionary journey so richly, how could the Judaizers claim to have the truth? The church was now quiet. All opposition by the Judaizers and Pharisees to the Gentile mission and the gospel of free grace was silenced.

After Peter, Paul, and Barnabas had finished speaking, it was James' turn to speak. The Lord's half-brother, James, was known as "James the Just" "because of his piety," and as indicated in Acts 12:17, was now the leader of the Jerusalem church (he was put to death by the Jewish high priest in A. D. 62). According to Christian tradition, "James was [self-denying] and scrupulous in keeping the law. The Judaizers within the church looked to him for support." His response to all of this was eagerly awaited—especially in light of his comments in the second chapter of his epistle.<sup>2</sup> After Paul and Barnabas finished recounting God's work among the Gentiles, in verses 13-21, James spoke. "*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; 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 the 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 is read every Sabbath in the synagogues."

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<sup>2</sup> Longenecker, Acts, 446.

James understood God had taken the Gentiles to be a people for himself (literally “for his own name”), fully agreeing with Peter’s assessment. James even applies to the Gentiles a designation from the Old Testament which formerly had been used only of Israel. James appeals to prophecy from Amos 9 (our Old Testament lesson) to make his point. In the last days, God will “rebuild David’s tent,” and “restore it,” a reference to a restored Israel in the messianic age. This restored Israel was composed of those elect Jews who embraced Jesus as the Messiah, described elsewhere by Paul as an elect remnant according to grace (Romans 11:5).

But gathered around this elect remnant of Israel in the messianic age will be a similar Gentile remnant, composed of those who also seek the Lord, and who also bear God’s name. According to James, in addition to those Jews who embrace the Messiah, there will also be a number of Gentiles who seek the Lord and who also bear his name, but who will remain ethnic Gentiles. This completely undercuts the idea that the Gentiles must become cultural Jews in order to be saved, keeping the law of Moses and submitting to circumcision if they wished to belong to the people of God. In the messianic age, membership in the New Israel is no longer based upon a racial/ethnic distinction between Jew and Gentile. Membership is solely based upon faith in Jesus! There is now one people of God, composed Jews and Gentiles who look to Jesus for salvation, who can keep their distinct ethnic identities and culture, even though members together of the New Israel and of the body of Christ.

Agreeing with Peter, Paul, and Barnabas, James too felt that the church should not make it difficult for Gentiles to come to faith in Christ by placing in their way the stumbling blocks of the Law of Moses and circumcision. Instead, James argued that the church should instruct Gentile converts who were justified by faith alone to live in gratitude before God, no longer living as pagans once they had embraced Christ as Messiah. James counseled the church that Gentile converts should abstain from those things that characterized the pagan religions of the age and which were utterly offensive to Jews; eating food sacrificed to idols, practicing sexual immorality (often connected to pagan fertility rights and temple prostitution), and the drinking of blood (also connected to pagan rituals).

James’ rationale is summed up in verse 20. “Moses is read” in the synagogues of every major city where the Gentile mission had gone. For Gentiles to continue do such things would have been as much of an offence to the Jew as the Judaizers demanding circumcision and obedience to the Law of Moses was to the Gentile. It would be much easier to keep the focus where it should be—on the saving work of Jesus Christ—if the Gentiles were not doing things which were so offensive to Jews. It would also remove the ground for the charges the Judaizers were no doubt making against Gentiles and their habits.

Once James finished speaking it was apparent that those former Pharisees, who sided with the Judaizers, had been thoroughly rebuked. According to verses 22-29, the decision which was reached was to be sent in earnest back to the church in Antioch. *“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. They sent Judas called Barsabbas, and Silas, leading men among the brothers, with the following letter: ‘The 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. 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.”*

“The apostles and elders, with the whole church,” were in complete agreement. The letter recorded here was then sent to the church in Antioch via Paul and Barnabas, along with two other prominent leaders in the church, Judas and Silas, who would serve as witnesses to the council’s decision. Once the group reached Antioch, the church there assembled, the letter was read and all were greatly encouraged by the decision (as recounted in verses 30-35). “*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.*” After Silas and Judas edified the church in Antioch through their own preaching, they returned home to Jerusalem. Paul and Barnabas stayed on in Antioch, as a second missionary journey was about to begin.

What can we take with us from this passage? The first thing is that despite the ethnic and cultural differences between Jew and Gentile, both groups were equal and full members in the New Israel. As Paul made clear in his Galatian letter, the gospel is not based upon human obedience to the law of Moses or submission to circumcision, which supposedly made the Jew superior to Gentiles. It is clear that the gospel is the preaching of Christ crucified, through which, God in his grace, calls his elect to faith in Jesus Christ, whether they be Jew or Gentile. The Law of Moses had been an unbearable yoke for the Jews. It was given by God to Moses precisely for the purpose of showing the people of Israel their sin and driving them to seek the coming savior. To turn around and now insist that unless a Gentile kept the Law and was circumcised in order to be justified, was to deny the gospel. God blessed the Gentile mission. No one could deny this. Peter, Paul, Barnabas, and even James, were in full agreement. The Judaizers and those sympathetic to them, were fully and completely repudiated by the assembled church, all of the apostles and the elders. Justification, *sola fide*, is the doctrine of the apostolic church.

A second thing we need to notice is that the church was clearly given birth by the proclamation of the gospel, so that the assembly which met in Jerusalem renders its judgment upon those who *deny* what the Scriptures so clearly teach. Despite the contention of the Roman church that this text shows the supposed equality of the authority of the church with that of the authority of Scripture, the exact opposite is true. The Jerusalem Council makes its determination *from the Scriptures* or as directed by the Holy Spirit (in words which are now Scripture). When Peter speaks of Paul’s letters as Scripture, (2 Peter 3:16), he is probably referring to the fact that the epistle to the Galatians, and the gospel of justification *sola fide*, was that to which the Old Testament Scriptures pointed all along. There is no sense that the church has authority over Scripture merely because it has apostles (Rome). But Acts 15 also refutes Congregationalism, because the idea that the local church has no connection to other congregations, or that individual Christians are not under authority of elders, is also shown to be false by the council. The Jerusalem Council clearly demonstrates the rule of elders—men who are on the same footing as the apostles when the church as a whole assembles to resolve this important dispute. The apostolic church, then, is neither Roman nor congregational in its government. It is Presbyterian—ruled by elders.

The practical consequence of this is that the preaching of the gospel which creates the church and gives us our unity. Despite all our personal differences, our disagreements, our cultural diversity, when we gather together around the proclamation of Christ crucified, are baptized into Christ, receive the sacrament of his body and blood, we who are diverse, become one. If Jesus Christ is at the center of our faith because he is the Lord of all, we do not need to look alike, think alike, or vote alike, to have the

kind of unity which the Scripture says is characteristic of Christ's church. All of us are under the authority of Christ—exercised through his word and sacraments, and which is made manifest in each local congregation by elders, who rule to ensure the fidelity of teaching and preaching to Christ's word in Scripture wherever Christ's people gather as a church.

Finally, we also learn from the Jerusalem Council that our unity arises only from the preached gospel. Preaching the gospel precludes us from putting stumbling blocks in the way of those who are not Christ's and who need to hear the preaching of Christ crucified. James' speech indicates that while we need not give up our individual cultures, nor be forced or shamed into doing those things which violate our own consciences, we are not to let these things get in the way of our collective mission as a church. If non-Christians are to hear the gospel from our lips, then we must not place our own agendas and foibles in the paths of those who are perishing in their sins. The offense of the church is to be the gospel it preaches, not us. Unfortunately, often the opposite is the case. Non-Christians are often driven away because we offend them through stumbling blocks of self-righteousness. This is a shame and it is sin. If people hear the gospel and are offended, so be it. Let the scandal of the cross be the offence, not us.

Acts 15, and Luke's account of the Jerusalem Council reminds us that the apostolic church placed its confidence for all of its life and missionary endeavors clearly in the gospel of free grace and justification *sola fide*. Paul's gospel was revealed to him by Jesus. It is therefore the church's gospel. Let us do as the first church did, place our confidence in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, who comes to us through his Word and sacraments. This same Jesus was preached by Paul, James, and Peter, feeds us with the manna from heaven—his own body and blood. Through faith in Jesus, we who are many become one. Our sins are forgiven. We are accounted righteous because Christ's righteousness is now ours, through faith in the same Jesus who was preached by Paul, Peter, James, and affirmed by all the elders at the Jerusalem Council. God's promise to bless the nations through Israel is a reality and we are the proof.