

Acts 15

Defining Moments

Good morning church. And Merry Christmas. Thank you for worshiping with us today as we continue our study in the book of Acts – we’ve been looking at the Unstoppable Gospel, Spirit, Mission, Church. Today, as we look at Acts 15, we come to a place in the short history of the Church – kind of a Defining Moment for the church. We see here the church is at a major moment, a defining moment, where the rest of their trajectory could be changed based on how they responded.

As I was studying and praying this week, studying this passage of Scripture, I started thinking about defining moments in my own life. In December 1998, on a pretty chilly Tuesday (I think) evening, I took this girl on a date. I had eyes for her ever since I first met her, but it took several months for us to actually go on a date. Over 20 years ago – I still remember that night. Had my shirt pressed (which was unusual for me at the time). At that point in my life I smoked cigarettes – but not on this date. I was going to do everything I could to make a good impression on her. And the result of this date – changed the trajectory of my life – because a few years later this girl and I would get married, we’d have a bunch of kids, we’d commit our lives to ministry in the local church through church planting – but it all gets traced back to this one moment.

See, in Acts 15, we see the church at a THEOLOGICAL point of no turning back. Whichever way they go and choose would set its trajectory. And it’s a huge decision for them.

I. The Problem – Is Grace Enough?

READ V15:1

Some men came down from Judea and began to teach the brothers, “Unless you are circumcised according to the custom prescribed by Moses, you cannot be saved.”

See, the issue at hand here is Salvation by Grace Alone (Sola Gratia) or is it Grace + Works of the Law (aka circumcision). Said another way, will we express Christianity as a sect of Judaism – that you have to become a Jew first, and a Christian second; or will we see Christianity as the completion and ultimate fulfillment of God’s purposes in the world? This is the church’s defining moment right here.

And all of the implications of this decision:

- Will we continue in global evangelization or will we just hang in Jerusalem?

This is a huge moment for the early church. Remember where they’ve come from :

- Planting of the church at Antioch
- Sending Saul & Barnabas to check on them
- Sending out Barnabas and Saul in their 1st mission journey

- Seeing both Jews and Gentiles believe the Gospel and trust in Christ
- Seeing the doors that God was opening – the clear working of God in the Gentile world

Now, some men come down to Antioch (where Paul and Barnabas are) claiming the authority of the Jerusalem church, saying “wait just a second – you have to become a Jew first, and then a Christian second”

READ 15:2-4

² After Paul and Barnabas had engaged them in serious argument and debate, Paul and Barnabas and some others were appointed to go up to the apostles and elders in Jerusalem about this issue. ³ When they had been sent on their way by the church, they passed through both Phoenicia and Samaria, describing in detail the conversion of the Gentiles, and they brought great joy to all the brothers and sisters.

⁴ When they arrived at Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the church, the apostles, and the elders, and **they reported all that God had done with them.**

Serious Argument and Debate – this would have been crushing to Paul’s theology. He had most likely already written the book of Galatians – where he defends that salvation is by Grace Alone, that you don’t have to abide by the rituals of the Old Testament law. And now these dudes come up and try to say that you do! Ha! Paul never forced those who God saved to become Jews first.

So serious this issue – They go to the home church in Jerusalem and share all that God had done with them. **Don’t miss this, the Mission is God’s – that’s why it is UNSTOPPABLE. We might be the tools, but never forget that it is God’s Mission.**

But this issue wasn’t going to just go away.

READ 15:5

⁵ But some of the believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees stood up and said, “It is necessary to circumcise them and to command them to keep the law of Moses.”

This issue wasn’t going to just go away. This is a defining moment in the life of the church.

II. The Response – Peter, Paul & Barnabas, James

Peter:

READ 15:6-11

⁶ The apostles and the elders gathered to consider this matter. ⁷ After there had been much debate, Peter stood up and said to them, “Brothers, you are aware that in the early days God made a choice among you,^[a] that by my mouth the

Gentiles would hear the gospel message and believe. ⁸ And God, who knows the heart, bore witness to them by giving them the Holy Spirit, just as he also did to us. ⁹ He made no distinction between us and them, cleansing their hearts by faith. ¹⁰ Now then, why are you testing God by putting a yoke on the disciples' necks that neither our ancestors nor we have been able to bear? ¹¹ On the contrary, we believe that we are saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus in the same way they are."

Peter knows firsthand that God's Mission and Gospel are to be global. If you remember a handful of weeks ago, in Acts 10, we see Peter and Cornelius, a Gentile who feared God, we saw an incredible conversion of Cornelius. And the Holy Spirit is poured out in the end of Acts 10, poured out on the Gentiles that heard (and believed) Peter's preaching.

Hear, years later, Peter boldly defends, in front of the apostles and the elders of the church – the truth that God's Gospel is for all who would believe, whether Jew or Greek and there really is no distinction. Just as Paul wrote in Galatians 3:27-29

²⁷ For those of you who were baptized into Christ have been clothed with Christ. ²⁸ There is no Jew or Greek, slave or free, male and female; since you are all one in Christ Jesus. ²⁹ And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, heirs according to the promise.

All that matters – is that you have turned from your sin and are trusting in Jesus alone. Not religious activity, not a baptism at the beach, not walking the aisle as a kid, not a christening, or even showing up to church every week. What matters is that you belong to Christ. How do we belong to Christ? By recognizing your sin for what it is – a violation of the holiness and perfect righteousness of God; but trusting in and turning to Jesus as the payment for your sin – the perfect son of God that lived the life that you are unable to live, that paid the price you are unable to pay, but ultimately defeated the enemy you and I are powerless to defeat.

Seeing God's offer of salvation as a free gift, by GRACE ALONE – Will you turn from your sin today and trust in Jesus?

Paul would write a few chapters back in Galatians 6:15

¹⁵ For^[b] both circumcision and uncircumcision mean nothing; what matters instead is a new creation.

Remember, the Holy Spirit inspired this writing (I believe) before the events of Acts 15. So if this group of apostles and elders in the Jerusalem church were to agree that you had to follow the rituals of Judaism (namely circumcision) and then trust in Jesus to be saved – this would blow a hole in Paul's theology.

We see in Peter's message summarized here that salvation is by GRACE ALONE.

III. Paul & Barnabas

In verse 12 says that the entire assembly fell silent and listened to Paul and Barnabas as they told all that GOD HAD DONE through them among the Gentiles.

Paul and Barnabas proclaiming the truth of the Gospel, and testifying to the work that GOD HAD DONE.

Next up, James.

IV. James' Turn

James – Jesus' brother. We have 2 James so far in the book of Acts. We have James the brother of John, who was martyred in Acts 12. Now in Acts 15 we have James Jesus' brother. Who didn't believe at first, but would later turn from his sin and trust in Jesus alone and become a pillar in the church at Jerusalem. James' turn.

READ 15:13-21

¹³ After they stopped speaking, James responded, "Brothers, listen to me. ¹⁴ Simeon^[b] has reported how God first intervened to take from the Gentiles a people for his name. ¹⁵ And the words of the prophets agree with this, as it is written:

**¹⁶ After these things I will return
and rebuild David's fallen tent.
I will rebuild its ruins
and set it up again,
¹⁷ so that the rest of humanity
may seek the Lord—
even all the Gentiles
who are called by my name—
declares the Lord
who makes these things ¹⁸ known from long ago.^{[c][d]}**

¹⁹ Therefore, in my judgment, we should not cause difficulties for those among the Gentiles who turn to God, ²⁰ but instead we should write to them to abstain from things polluted by idols, from sexual immorality, from eating anything that has been strangled, and from blood. ²¹ For since ancient times, Moses has had those who proclaim him in every city, and every Sabbath day he is read aloud in the synagogues."

Peter's (Simeon's) experience. But hear me – Peter's experience isn't all that James relies on. Yes, Peter's experience matters – BUT IT MUST BE UNDERSTOOD THROUGH SCRIPTURE. The Scriptures always take priority to our experiences.

V15-18

James quotes Amos 9 here. How do we know it's Amos 9 – look at the superscript in your Bible if you use a reference Bible it should point you to where the quote is from.

James is saying – look guys, all of the prophets point us to the truth that God is worthy of being worshiped by all people, and that God will call people for Himself out of every nation, tribe and language; out of every people group.

He will rebuild David's fallen tent → THROUGH CHRIST, and call people all over the globe to worship Christ alone.

No, salvation isn't just for the Jews. No, you can't add anything to the Gospel of God's Grace alone – not circumcision, not going to church, not working in the parking lot team, not giving money at the offering plate, not reading your Bible most days, not listening to Christian music or podcast preaching – NOTHING.

Salvation is By Grace ALONE through Faith ALONE in Christ ALONE. It is a free gift.

In this defining moment – the church turned to the Scriptures, evaluated their experiences through the Scriptures, and responded according to the Spirit of God.

Salvation by grace alone was defended. James encourages the Gentile brothers and sisters in 4 ways – not like the lady who used to yell at me for wearing my hat in church – way different than that. These 4 areas had to do with religious devotion, and were intended to help to maintain fellowship between the people of God, both Jews and Gentiles that had by grace alone turned from their sin and were trusting in Jesus.

CLOSING

Talk about defining moments – for the early church this moment was huge. It kept the trajectory of prioritizing God's global mission – it kept the Gospel at the core – that salvation is by Grace ALONE – not from anything we could do.

But let me ask each of you this morning – what's the most important defining moment in your life?