

## **“We Will Be Saved through the Grace of the Lord Jesus” (Acts 15:1-35)**

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*Acts 15:1–5 (ESV)*

*<sup>1</sup>But 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.” <sup>2</sup>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. <sup>3</sup>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. <sup>4</sup>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. <sup>5</sup>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.”<sup>1</sup>*

In a world of uncertainty, I am certain of a few things. One, in a world where time moves in one direction only, in which we only get older and not younger, and in which we have a limited number of years, we need to be connected to something eternal, something that has no end. In a world in which all of us—even the best of us—do wrong things, we need to be connected to something perfect. In a world that can seem random and chaotic and meaningless, we need something that gives our lives meaning and purpose. In a world that can be frightening, we need something that will calm our fears, something that will guarantee us that we will be spared the worst fate. In other words, all of us need salvation.

I believe that everyone, deep down, knows that God exists. And one of our big questions is, “How can be acceptable to God?” Another way of asking this question is, “How can we have a right relationship with God?” Or, “How can we receive God’s favor and not his wrath?” Simply put, the question is, “How can we be saved?” Perhaps most people don’t go around asking these questions, but I believe we all sense that we need to be connected to God. (Of course, many people substitute a false god or an idol for the true God.)

So, what is the answer to those questions? How do we have a relationship with God? What do we need to do?

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<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations are taken from the English Standard Version (ESV).

This has always been an important question. It's an important question today and it was an important question almost two thousand years ago, when the message of Christianity started to spread from Jerusalem throughout the Roman Empire. Christianity started as an entirely Jewish movement. Jesus was Jewish, the apostles were Jewish, and the earliest believers were Jewish. But as we have seen in recent weeks, as we have studied the book of Acts, non-Jewish people, Gentiles started becoming Christians. New questions arose: "What do Gentiles need to do to become Christians? Do they need to become Jews first? Do the men need to be circumcised? Do they need to eat the same food we do? Do they need to observe the Sabbath? Do they need to follow all of the law that God gave to Moses at Mount Sinai?"

It took some time for these questions to be answered. The earliest Christians, Jewish believers in Jesus, had to work out the implications of the gospel, the good news of who Jesus is and what Jesus has done. This didn't happen overnight. And it's understandable why it took a while. What Jesus did in his sinless life, his atoning death, and his death-crushing resurrection changed things. The people of God no longer had to be circumcised. They no longer had to follow the law of Moses, including what the law said about food. They no longer had to go to the temple in Jerusalem and offer sacrifices for their sins. These changes were so significant that it took some time for the earliest Christians to understand them. So we find in the book of Acts, as well as in some of the New Testament letters, that there were some controversies surrounding what it meant for Jews and Gentiles to be one people of God united to one Lord, Jesus of Nazareth.

That's what we see in Acts 15. Many biblical scholars agree that this chapter is the most significant in the book. I'm not sure I agree. I think the outpouring of the Holy Spirit in chapter 2 was a pretty big deal. But chapter 15 is very important. In this chapter, the leaders of the church in Jerusalem figured out what Gentiles needed to do to be in a right relationship with God.

So, without any further ado, let's take a look at the text. In the verses that were just read, verses 1-5, we're told that some men from Judea came to Antioch and started teaching the Christians there, "Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved." When this happened, there was a heated debate between the men from Judea and Paul and Barnabas.

This may seem like a strange debate to us, but this was a huge issue at the time. Circumcision set the Jews apart. Every male Israelite was supposed to be circumcised on the

eighth day, to show that they were set apart as a child of Abraham. Every man who wanted to convert to Judaism had to be circumcised, regardless of his age. What the Jews didn't realize was that though circumcision is commanded in the Old Testament, it was always intended to be a sign that pointed to a greater reality: a transformation, a putting off the flesh. That's why even in the Old Testament, we're told about circumcised hearts (Deut. 10:16; 30:6; Jer. 4:4).

It was around this time that Paul wrote his letter to the Galatians. We looked carefully at that book last summer, and in Galatians we see that Paul says very clearly that circumcision counts for nothing. He says that what matters isn't being circumcised, or even not being circumcised. What matters is faith, love, and being transformed by God (Gal. 5:6; 6:15). Still, the debate over circumcision didn't end immediately. Since it had become such a contentious issue in Antioch, Paul and Barnabas go to Jerusalem to talk to the apostles and elders of the church in Jerusalem. On the way, Paul and Barnabas pass through the regions of Phoenicia and Samaria, telling the believers there about the many Gentiles who were coming to faith. When they arrive in Jerusalem, they do the same thing.

Yet in verse 5, we're told, "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.'" Luke, the author of Acts, tells us that these men are believers. They believed that Jesus was the Messiah, the anointed Son of David, the promised King who would come and make everything right. We're also told they were Pharisees, the group of Jewish religious leaders who were very conservative and strict in their adherence to the law given to the Israelites through Moses at Mount Sinai. So even though they thought Jesus was the Messiah and that his death on the cross was the only sacrifice needed to pay for sins, they still believed that Gentiles had to be circumcised and had to follow the law. This was completely contrary to what Paul was teaching. Would there be two groups of Christians teaching two very different things?

Let's see how this situation was addressed. First, we'll see what the apostle Peter says about the matter. Let's read verses 6-11:

<sup>6</sup>The apostles and the elders were gathered together to consider this matter.  
<sup>7</sup>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. <sup>8</sup>And God, who knows the heart, bore witness to them, by giving them the Holy Spirit just as he did to us, <sup>9</sup>and he made no distinction between us and them, having cleansed their hearts by faith. <sup>10</sup>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? <sup>11</sup> But we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will.”

Peter reminds the apostles, the chosen representatives of Jesus, and the elders, the leaders of the church in Jerusalem, that God chose him to preach to Gentiles. We read about that in chapters 10 and 11. And when Peter preached, some Gentiles believed the message about Jesus. Peter says that God knew their hearts and gave them the Holy Spirit, just as he gave the Holy Spirit to the Jewish Christians on the day of Pentecost in chapter 2. He says quite clearly that God didn't make a distinction between Jews and Gentiles. God cleansed the hearts of the Gentile believers because they trusted that the message about Jesus is true. What Peter doesn't say explicitly is this: The Gentiles were cleansed—they were forgiven of all their sins, their wrongdoing—and they received the gift of the Holy Spirit even though they weren't circumcised and even though they didn't follow the law of Moses. If God accepted these Gentiles because they trusted in Jesus, why should the Jewish Christians place additional demands on them?

Peter says that these Pharisee Christians are putting God to the test, because they are demanding more than God demands. And by insisting that Gentile Christians follow the law of Moses, they are putting a yoke on their necks, one that even the Jews were unable to bear. Some Jewish teachers referred to the law as a yoke<sup>2</sup>—if you wanted to be a Jew, a person of God, you had to submit to the law, which was a gift from God. But the law was a burden, because no one could fully obey it. When Paul wrote Galatians, he told them, “For freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery” (Gal. 5:1). Submitting yourself to the law was like becoming a slave. It didn't bring freedom.

Why is that? Why does the law not bring freedom? Because no one kept the law perfectly. No one keeps a comprehensive set of laws perfectly. Even those people who kept the outward laws didn't keep the internal ones perfectly, the ones like, “You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might” (Deut. 6:5). Who has ever loved God with all of their very being? Who hasn't put something before God? Who hasn't coveted? Which one of us hasn't lied? Simply put, no ordinary human being has ever lived a perfect life.

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<sup>2</sup> See Sanhedrin 94b in the Babylonian Talmud, < [http://www.come-and-hear.com/sanhedrin/sanhedrin\\_94.html](http://www.come-and-hear.com/sanhedrin/sanhedrin_94.html)>, accessed August 22, 2015.

So if we're supposed to achieve salvation through a striving to keep a set of laws, we'll never feel free. When we're keeping those laws, we'll feel like we're better than other people. When we fail to keep those laws, we'll feel worthless. This is what Tim Keller says: "If you center your life and identity on religion and morality, you will, if you are living up to your normal standards, be proud, self-righteous, and cruel. If you don't live up to your standards, your guilt will be utterly devastating."<sup>3</sup>

But it's not only religious people who try to achieve salvation through obedience to laws. Other people try to find a meaningful life by making a lot of money, or by being attractive and healthy. It's not uncommon to find people combining these things. So much of our love of celebrities in America has to do with the fact that these people are attractive, rich, and leading fabulous lives. And our focus on wealth and good looks creates new laws: If you want to be somebody, you need to make a lot of money and eat right and work out. And like Tim Keller says, if you're following those laws, you'll think you're better than people who aren't. But what happens if you suddenly lose a job, or an investment goes bad? What happens if you have an accident or an injury and aren't as healthy and as good looking? You're crushed. "Try harder" isn't a message that brings freedom.

And it's not the gospel message. Peter knew that. That's why he says, in verse 11, "But we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will." Earlier, he said the Gentiles Christians received the Holy Spirit, just as the Jewish Christians did. Now, he says, "We will be saved by grace, just as they will." Salvation is the same for everyone: It is through the grace of Jesus. Salvation is a gift. To be saved, one needs to turn from false gods—whether they are money, fame, false religions, or the idea that you can save yourself—and turn to the true God. To be saved, a person needs to repent from sin and put his or her trust in Jesus. That person needs to believe that Jesus is who the Bible says he is, and he has done what the Bible says he has done.

And every part of salvation is a gift from God. Jesus has done the work for us. His perfect life of obedience to the law is credited to everyone who trusts in him. And he atoned for their sins when he died on the cross. That means that we don't have to be perfect to be acceptable to God. And we don't have to go back and make up for all the bad things we've done, as if we

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<sup>3</sup> Timothy Keller, *The Reason for God: Belief in an Age of Skepticism* (New York: Riverhead, 2008), 291.

could even do that. Instead, we need to confess our sins to God and confess our need for a savior. And we need to trust that Jesus is that savior.

In Ephesians, Paul says that faith itself is a gift. He writes,

<sup>8</sup>For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, <sup>9</sup>not a result of works, so that no one may boast (Eph. 2:8-9).

We're also told that repentance is a gift from God (2 Tim. 2:25). And God sustains our faith. He sustains our right standing with him. That's what Peter writes in his first letter. In 1 Peter 1:3-5, he writes,

<sup>3</sup>Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! According to his great mercy, he has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, <sup>4</sup>to an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, <sup>5</sup>who by God's power are being guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time.

All of this is a gift. We are saved by God's grace. That doesn't mean we don't do anything. But it means that when we turn away from sinning and we follow Jesus, it's because God has given us the ability and strength to do those things.

If salvation wasn't a gift, we would be doomed. We would have a yoke around our necks that we couldn't bear. We would be enslaved. Fortunately, Jesus invites sinners like me and you to come to him for relief. He says, in Matthew 11:28-30,

<sup>28</sup>Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. <sup>29</sup>Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. <sup>30</sup>For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light."

When we come under Jesus' yoke, under his reign and rule, we find that he gives us rest. He doesn't demand what we can't give him. He gave his life for us so we can live for him.

Peter's words to the men in Jerusalem are very important. Yet while they listen to Peter, and while they listen to what God had done through Paul and Barnabas, it was James, the brother of the Jesus, who had become the leader of the church in Jerusalem. James needs to weigh in on the situation. That's what we see happen in verses 12-21:

<sup>12</sup>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. <sup>13</sup>After they finished speaking, James replied, "Brothers, listen to me. <sup>14</sup>Simeon has related how God first visited the Gentiles, to take from them a

people for his name. <sup>15</sup> And with this the words of the prophets agree, just as it is written,

<sup>16</sup> “ ‘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,  
<sup>17</sup> 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 <sup>18</sup> known from of old.’

<sup>19</sup> Therefore my judgment is that we should not trouble those of the Gentiles who turn to God, <sup>20</sup> 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. <sup>21</sup> For from ancient generations Moses has had in every city those who proclaim him, for he is read every Sabbath in the synagogues.”

James is now the leader of the church in Jerusalem. We’re not told how that came to be, but we know from the rest of the New Testament that he wasn’t a believer in Jesus—even though Jesus was his brother—before Jesus died and rose from the grave. But Jesus appeared to James after his resurrection (1 Cor. 15:7) and James wrote the letter in the New Testament that bears his name. At any rate, he is now the one to whom everyone is looking for a decision. And in his speech, he seems to agree with Peter, whom he calls Simeon.

James makes two major points in his speech. First, he says that God has always planned to make Gentiles a part of his people. He says that God “visited” the Gentiles in order to make them a people for his name. This is similar to language used of Israel in the Old Testament (Deut. 14:2), and perhaps James is alluding to Zechariah 2:11, which says, “And many nations shall join themselves to the LORD in that day, and shall be my people.”

Then James quotes the Greek version of Amos 9:11-12, which speaks about David’s “tent” being restored. This is a reference to the kingdom of David. King David’s dynasty would be restored. And James seems to be saying that the Son of David, Jesus, restored this dynasty, and the result is that Gentiles who are called by God will seek the Lord. The point of rebuilding David’s kingdom is to bring Gentiles into God’s kingdom. And now that the true King, a descendant of David and also God in the flesh, has come, it is now time for Gentiles to become part of the people of God. This was always God’s plan.

The second point that James makes is that Gentiles who turn to God shouldn’t be “troubled” or “burdened” (v. 28). He then presents a list of four things that Gentiles need to do:

abstain from things polluted by idols, abstain from sexual immorality, abstain from eating animals that have been strangled, and abstain from blood. We're told the reason why: "For from ancient generations Moses has had in every city those who proclaim him, for he is read every Sabbath in the synagogues."

This bit of Acts 15 can be a bit perplexing, and scholars have disagreed about the meaning of these requirements. Some people think that the Gentiles are only required to abide by the laws that eliminated the things that were most offensive to the Jews. Others think that they are being told to abide by laws in Leviticus 17 and 18 that are given to "strangers" who live in the midst of Israel. But there are two problems: These proposals don't really match the evidence, and they also don't line up with what Paul taught about the law. It doesn't make any sense that Gentiles are told they need to obey a few laws in order to be saved.

The best explanation of this passage that I have read comes from a scholar named Ben Witherington. He says that these four things describe activities that happened in pagan temples. In pagan temples, animals were sacrificed and people would eat the flesh of those animals. In some pagan temples, worshipers engaged in sex with prostitutes. At pagan temples, animals were strangled because there was a belief that the life of the strangled animals would enter into the idols that were worshiped. And at pagan temples, there were times when the priests would drink the blood of the animals sacrificed.<sup>4</sup>

Remember why Gentiles are to refrain from these things: Because the law is proclaimed in synagogues throughout the Roman Empire. James may be saying, "The Gentiles have already had an opportunity to hear about the law of Moses, and this law didn't save them." It's also possible that he's saying something like this: "We want Jewish people to come to faith in Jesus. And we want Gentiles to come to faith in Jesus. We don't want Jewish people to get the idea that Gentiles are worshiping Jesus while also worshiping idols. Therefore, we demand that Gentiles make a clean break from worshiping idols."

At any rate, what James is saying is that Gentiles need to turn from idols, from worshiping false gods. In other words, they need to repent. And they need to put their trust in Jesus. This is the way anyone can be saved: repentance from sins and faith in Jesus.

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<sup>4</sup> Ben Witherington III, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), 459-467.

In the next several verses, we see that the apostles and elders agree with James, and they send four men—Paul, Barnabas, Judas (called Barsabbas, obviously not Iscariot), and Silas—to deliver a letter to the churches in Antioch and the surrounding region. Let’s read verses 22-29:

<sup>22</sup> 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,<sup>23</sup> 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.<sup>24</sup> 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,<sup>25</sup> 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,<sup>26</sup> men who have risked their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.<sup>27</sup> We have therefore sent Judas and Silas, who themselves will tell you the same things by word of mouth.<sup>28</sup> For it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to lay on you no greater burden than these requirements:<sup>29</sup> 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 letter states that some people have troubled these Christians, by unsettling their minds with words. The letter makes it clear that these people—often called “Judaizers,” because they insist that Gentiles essentially become Jews in order to become Christians—were not instructed by the apostles. And they make it clear that what they are telling these Gentile believers is from the Holy Spirit. That’s why they write, in verse 28, “it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to lay on you no greater burden than these requirements.” This is God’s decision.

When the letter is received, it is met with rejoicing. The Gentile Christians were encouraged by this news. We read about that in verses 30-35:

<sup>30</sup> So when they were sent off, they went down to Antioch, and having gathered the congregation together, they delivered the letter.<sup>31</sup> And when they had read it, they rejoiced because of its encouragement.<sup>32</sup> And Judas and Silas, who were themselves prophets, encouraged and strengthened the brothers with many words.<sup>33</sup> And after they had spent some time, they were sent off in peace by the brothers to those who had sent them.<sup>35</sup> But Paul and Barnabas remained in Antioch, teaching and preaching the word of the Lord, with many others also.

We’ll learn more about Silas next week, because he will join Paul on his next missionary trip. He, like Paul, encourages and strengthens the believers. That’s an important part of Paul’s ministry, too. He didn’t just make converts; he also made sure that these new Christians learned more about God and how to live for him.

Now that we've looked at this text, what does this mean for us? After all, we don't seem to be having debates about circumcision and which foods to eat. So what does this passage teach us?

The main thing to see is that this passage teaches us that in order for people to become Christians, they need to turn from idols and turn to Jesus. I realize that to some people, talk about idolatry also seems very foreign. After all, how many people are going to temples to worship a false god, having sex at those temples, and eating meat and drinking blood sacrificed to those idols? I don't think many people are doing that.

But pretty much anything can be an idol. Whatever someone trusts, loves, and obeys in an ultimate sense is an idol. A person doesn't have to call that thing a "god" or an "idol." That person doesn't have to say he or she "worships" anything or anyone. But whatever someone trusts to give their life meaning is an idol. Whatever one trusts will make their lives worth living is an idol. Whatever one believes will provide ultimate security and comfort is that person's god. Everyone puts their ultimate hope and trust in something. In order to become a Christian, a person needs to put their ultimate hope and trust in Jesus.

We also need to be clear about this: A person doesn't need to meet all kinds of preconditions in order to become a Christian. We don't say to someone, "If you want to become a Christian, here's what you need to do: You need to come to church every week, give your money to the church, and start behaving in a perfectly moral way." Now, I expect that *after* a person becomes a Christian, he or she will start coming to church, start to support the ministry of the church, and start to behave in a way that lines up with the character of God and his design for our lives. But we must remember that a person doesn't become a Christian because they're obedient. No, they become obedient because they're Christians and they are in the process of being transformed by God. We can't expect that people will already be transformed by God when they become Christians. What that means is that if we see people come to this church who are exploring Christianity, their lives may be messy at first. There will likely be some sins in their lives that they haven't turned away from yet. And we need to offer them grace.

I want us to think about applying all of this specifically to a hot-button issue: What would it take for someone who identifies as part of the LGBT community to become a Christian? What would it take for someone who identifies as gay or transgender to become part of the body of Christ? Do we say, "Stop being gay in order to become a Christian?" Yes and no.

Here's the "no" part: I'm not sure we can say, "Unless you clean up your sex life first, you can't be a Christian." The key word in that sentence is "first." We can't expect that someone will have a perfectly moral sex life in order to become a Christian. But that person will need to realize that they are sinful and do commit sins of all kinds, and that their only hope for salvation is Jesus. And when they come to faith in Jesus, they will have to make him their identity, and not their sexuality or what they believe is their gender. That's the "yes" part. A person can't find his or her identity in Christ and also in a sexuality or a gender that is contrary to God's design. And if they find their identity in Christ, they will believe that Jesus is Lord, and what he says about sex and marriage is true and must be obeyed. And as the Holy Spirit works in that person's life, we should expect that changes will come, even if they don't all come at once, or even if there are some failures along the way.

But what this means is that a person will have to let go of false views of God in order to become a Christian. This past week, I heard two examples of people who identify as both Christian and as either gay or bisexual claim that God is evolving. This is a false view of God. God does not change. It's true that his ways have changed. After all, he gave the Israelites the law, which was only intended for a certain time. But that was part of God's eternal plan. Yet from the beginning, before sin entered into the world, God made men and women to come together in marriage. Sex is supposed to occur only within the bounds of marriage. Yet the ultimate goal of marriage is not a human relationship. No, marriage is meant to point to a greater relationship: the relationship between God and his people. And that relationship is a "hetero" relationship: It's a relationship between two different parties: God and humans. It's not a relationship between God and God, or people and people. So the definition of marriage matters. And sex is meant to be experienced only within marriage.

In all of this, we see that Christianity is relational. It's ultimately not about keeping laws. It's about having a relationship with Jesus. And when we have that relationship, we will be changed. It's true that we become like the thing or person we worship. And if we truly worship Jesus—if we truly know him—we will become like him.