

Be on Guard for Yourselves and For all the Flock

2- The Danger of the Heresy of Legalism

January 10, 2021

The Acts 15:1-31

1 Some men came down from Judea and began teaching the brethren, "Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved."

2 And when Paul and Barnabas had great dissension and debate with them, the brethren determined that Paul and Barnabas and some others of them should go up to Jerusalem to the apostles and elders concerning this issue.

3 Therefore, being sent on their way by the church, they were passing through both Phoenicia and Samaria, describing in detail the conversion of the Gentiles, and were bringing great joy to all the brethren.

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

5 But some of the sect of the Pharisees who had believed stood up, saying, "It is necessary to circumcise them and to direct them to observe the Law of Moses."

6 The apostles and the elders came together to look into this matter.

7 After there had been much debate, Peter stood up and said to them, "Brethren, you know that in the early days God made a choice among you, that by my mouth the Gentiles would hear the word of the gospel and believe.

8 And God, who knows the heart, testified to them giving them the Holy Spirit, just as He also did to us;

9 and He made no distinction between us and them, cleansing their hearts by faith.

10 Now therefore why do you put God to the test by placing upon the neck of the disciples a yoke which neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear?

11 But we believe that we are saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, in the same way as they also are."

12 All the people kept silent, and they were listening to Barnabas and Paul as they were relating what signs and wonders God had done through them among the Gentiles.

13 After they had stopped speaking, James answered, saying, "Brethren, listen to me.

14 Simeon has related how God first concerned Himself about taking from among the Gentiles a people for His name.

15 With this the words of the Prophets agree, just as it is written,

16 'AFTER THESE THINGS I will return, AND I WILL REBUILD THE TABERNACLE] OF DAVID WHICH HAS FALLEN, AND I WILL REBUILD ITS RUINS, AND I WILL RESTORE IT,

17 SO THAT THE REST OF MANKIND MAY SEEK THE LORD, AND ALL THE GENTILES WHO ARE CALLED BY MY NAME,'

18 SAYS THE LORD, WHO MAKES THESE THINGS KNOWN FROM LONG AGO.

19 Therefore it is my judgment that we do not trouble those who are turning to God from among the Gentiles,

20 but that we write to them that they abstain from things contaminated by idols and from fornication and from what is strangled and from blood.

21 For Moses from ancient generations has in every city those who preach him, since he is read in the synagogues every Sabbath."

22 Then it seemed good to the apostles and the elders, with the whole church, to choose men from among them to send to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas

—Judas called Barsabbas, and Silas, leading men among the brethren,

23 and they sent this letter by them, "The apostles and the brethren who are elders, to the brethren in Antioch and Syria and Cilicia who are from the Gentiles, greetings.

24 "Since we have heard that some of our number to whom we gave no instruction have disturbed you with their words, unsettling your souls,

25 it seemed good to us, having become of one mind, to select men to send to you with our beloved Barnabas and Paul,

26 men who have risked their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.

27 Therefore we have sent Judas and Silas, who themselves will also report the same things by word of mouth.

28 For it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to lay upon you no greater burden than these essentials:

29 that you abstain from things sacrificed to idols and from blood and from things strangled and from fornication; if you keep yourselves free from such things, you will do well. Farewell."

30 So when they were sent away, they went down to Antioch; and having gathered the congregation together, they delivered the letter.

31 When they had read it, they rejoiced because of its encouragement.

To the Glory of God

Now when the Apostle Paul looked his own funeral “in the face”, he said,

Philippians 1:20b

... my earnest expectation and hope [is] that I will not be put to shame in anything, but that with all boldness, Christ will even now, as always, be exalted in my body, whether by life or by death.

... so, Paul prayed that Jesus would be exalted at his funeral. And then in **1Corinthians 10:31**, he said,

Whether, then, you eat or drink or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God.

... so, Paul wanted God to look glorious- even in the way he ate and drank. And then, in **1Corinthians 6:19&20** Paul said,

Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God, and that you are not your own? For you have been bought with a price: therefore glorify God in your body.

... so, Paul desired that God would be glorified by the way he handled his body.

So, part of the Goal of all of us assembling here today is that we would make Jesus Christ look glorious and magnificent. Because we have bought into a Concept that is so rare these days- *especially* in the modern Church: The Concept that God Himself is radically “God-centered”; and that we were saved to become equally “God-centered”; and that the pathway for all of us to arrive at the fullness of our own Joy- is through this Concept of being radically “God-centered” in every area of life. Jesus Himself said in **Matthew 5:16**:

Let your light shine before men in such a way that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven.

... so, we should earnestly desire that we do our “Good Works” in such a way that the ONLY response of those who see them- is to glorify God. In the Old Testament, God spoke through the Prophet in **Isaiah 43:6&7**:

... Bring My sons from afar And My daughters from the ends of the earth, Everyone who is called by My name, And whom I have created for My glory

... and Paul said this in **Colossians 1:16-20**:

For by Him all things were created, both in the heavens and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things have been created through Him and for Him. He is before all things, and in Him all things hold together. He is also head of the body, the church; and He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that He Himself will come to have first place in everything. For it was the Father's good pleasure for all the fullness to dwell in Him, and through Him to reconcile all things to Himself...

So, it is crystal clear to me that in these verses and a thousand more- that God intends for our lives to bring Him- Glory. God means that every single thing that we think; and say; and ponder; and do- to be for God's Glory; that we do all things- to make Jesus look magnificent; that we do all things- so that Jesus Christ will be Preeminent; that Jesus will always have "First Place"; that we do all things and say all things, in such a way that will prove, beyond any doubt- that Jesus is the Treasure of the Universe; the Darling of the Trinity; and the Fairest of ten thousand to our souls.

So, the Holy Bible teaches clearly and repeatedly that we were created to put God's infinite Value on display. That is the only reason we exist; it is the sole reason our heart beats and why we take up space and suck air.

Now God didn't need us to be Great. He was already Great before He made anything. But we make God's Greatness seen; and known; and rejoiced over. How? By God *displaying* His Grace on us- to save us; and to keep us saved; and to use us. You see, God saving wicked rebels- by what He alone does for them- and changing them- to the degree- that these earthen vessels truly find the highest degree of their own Joy; and the fullness of their own Delight- in Jesus being magnified- displays or shows or reveals the utter magnificence of God's Grace. And that is why **Ephesians 1:5&6a** says,

He predestined us to adoption as sons through Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the kind intention of His will, to the praise of the glory of His grace...

Now this Passage teaches that God predestined us to a part of Salvation called, "Adoption". Now people want to argue and say that it doesn't say Salvation here, so any Predestination is only about Adoption and NOT to Salvation itself. And that's about the lamest argument I've every heard, because the only reason we are adopted is because we are saved. So, there wouldn't be any Adoption without Salvation. And then Paul went on to say that this Predestination

is “THROUGH” Jesus Christ (Alone) and this Predestination is “TO” Jesus (Alone). And the catalyst as to how and why God predestinates us is:

... according to the kind intention of His will ...

NOT our Choice; NOT our Decision; and NOT our Works. God predestined us according to the kind Intention of His Will. Okay, but to what End does all this go? What is the final, best, highest, and decisive Purpose as to WHY God predestined us?

... to the praise of the glory of His grace...

Now why didn't Paul say that our Predestination was to the Glory of God's Sovereignty; or to the Glory of God's Omnipotence; or to the Glory of God's Righteousness? Why say our Predestination was to the praise of the Glory of God's Grace?

Because God's Grace is the single most important way that God is glorified. God is made to look glorious- *better* and more *decisive* through the display of His Grace- than He is in the breathtaking Miracles of Creation- or anything else that God has ever done. Now how do I know that? Because of the way the Bible speaks about it.

Notice here that **Ephesians 1:6a** says that God's Grace has a “Glory” to it. Paul didn't say our being predestined to Salvation was simply to God's Glory- but to the “*Glory of His Grace*”. And another way of understanding the word, “Glory” is to say, “Renown” or “Honor” or “Fame” or “Splendor” or “Greatness”. And then notice that Paul said we were predestined to the PRAISE of the Glory of His Grace. And another way of understanding “Praise” is to understand “Appreciation” or “Acclaim” or “Acknowledgment” or “Homage” or “Recognition”.

So, Paul infallibly taught that we were predestined for Salvation and Adoption for the ultimate End of the Praise of the Glory of God's Grace. Or the Appreciation of the Splendor of God's Grace. Or the Recognition of the Renown of God's Grace. Or the Acclaim of the Greatness of God's Grace.

In other words, God's Grace has an Honor to it; a Splendor to it; a Fame about it. Paul said it has a Glory to it. And the Fame and Splendor and Glory of God's Grace DESERVES to be Appreciated. It DESERVES to be Recognized; and Acknowledged. Yet the Honor and Splendor and Fame and Glory of God's Grace would go unnoticed; and it would go unseen; and unappreciated and not recognized- if it wasn't seen; or revealed; or displayed; or shown.

In other words, even though God's Grace is unspeakably magnificent- it wouldn't be praised or valued or honored- unless it was shown or displayed or revealed. So, how is God's Grace shown the best? How is God's Grace revealed- the clearest? How is God's Grace displayed in all of its pristine qualities and attributes? How is God's Grace shown to the world in all of its breathtaking Beauty? When unimportant and unworthy wicked sinners are saved- by what God alone does for them! So, saving sinners; and keeping them saved; and changing them so radically that they truly delight themselves in God being glorified- displays God's Glory the *best* and the *most*- with all of Grace's magnificent Qualities radiating out for all to see.

The Bible says that all Heaven rejoices when one sinner is saved. But have you ever pondered why all Heaven rejoices? Is it because they see the value of the individual, who has been saved? I honestly believe people DO think that. But the answer is, "No." The heavenly beings (angels; cherubim; seraphim; etc.) rejoice- because they see the display of the *Glory* of God's Grace. They see the *Magnificence* of God's Grace on display. They see the *Beauty*; and the *Importance*; and the *Value*; and the *Worth*; and the *Splendor* of God's Grace being shown. And what does the Bible say these beings do when they see or recognize the Glory of God's Grace? They rejoice. They *acknowledge* it. They *appreciate* it. They *praise* it.

And that is why God's Grace is so important. And that is why we must learn about God's Grace; and why we must learn to value and appreciate and acknowledge and praise it too. But that is hard for us- because Grace doesn't exist or operate according to human logic. In fact, Grace operates *contrary* to human logic. And that is why it is so misunderstood.

We, humans understand things like Damnation and Retribution and Judgment and Wrath and Vengeance- easily. We've got those things down pat. But Grace- Grace eludes us and so, it largely remains a Mystery to us. Oh, people repeat the mantra, "*Grace is God's unearned Favor*". And that is true- but what does that really *mean*? And when you ask- people usually have one- or two- word answers, like, "*It's great*" or "*It's wonderful!*" - showing that they really *don't* understand it. Because if they did- they wouldn't reject Predestination- which is the very *epitome* of God's Grace- according to the Apostle Paul.

So, we must begin to learn about Grace in order to truly appreciate and respect and marvel at it and to comprehend it. And as we do- we will begin to see why it is so wrong; so evil; and so bad to either *ignore* Grace or to *abuse* it. Which is what Heresy does.

Now as I told you last week- God has burdened my heart to take a short "vacation" from our verse-by-verse "journey" through the **Epistle of James** to begin this new year by looking at the Danger of Heresy and False Teaching. And,

last week, we looked at what the half-brother of Jesus infallibly wrote about this from **Jude 3&4**:

3 Beloved, while I was making every effort to write you about our common salvation, I felt the necessity to write to you appealing that you contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all handed down to the saints.

4 For certain persons have crept in unnoticed, those who were long beforehand marked out for this condemnation, ungodly persons who turn the grace of our God into licentiousness and deny our only Master and Lord, Jesus Christ.

... so, these two areas:

1. The Grace of God
2. The Person and Work of Jesus

... have to do with what is called, “Essential Truth”. And Essential Truth is Truth that a person MUST believe in order to be saved. If a person either doesn’t understand or doesn’t believe in the elements of Essential Truth- they are not saved; they are NOT a Christian; and they are NOT a brother or sister in Christ. That is how important Essential Truth is.

Now another name for Essential Truth is “Orthodoxy”. And, over the Centuries, numerous attempts have been made by the Christian Church to identify and define Orthodoxy or Essential Truth. And as these attempts were made- the Church developed “Summary Statements” that summarized what Orthodoxy was. And among those Creeds are:

- The Apostles Creed (AD 120-250)
- The Nicene Creed (AD 325 and AD 381)
- The Definitions of Chalcedon (AD 451)
- The Athanasian Creed (AD 500)

Now at some point after the Athanasian Creed- the Church stopped developing these Creeds. And one reason was they thought they had done a pretty good job of defining just what Essential Truth was. But another reason was that the Creeds became longer and more cumbersome and much harder to memorize.

You see, the majority of those in the early Church were illiterate. And so, the Creeds were developed to allow these people the ability to memorize what Christian Orthodoxy was- so they could defeat Heresy. But as the years progressed- more false Teachings arose and at each juncture- new information had

to be added to the already cumbersome definition of what Essential Truth was- until it became virtually impossible to memorize.

Now we learned last week that *part* of the Ministry of Elders in the Church is that they are to be on the alert and guard the *purity* and the *effectiveness* of what is believed and taught in the Church- so that we may honor Jesus Christ and edify the sheep with a pure and holy Doctrine.

We must remember that wicked sinners are saved and forgiven and made Righteous by what we “believe in”; what we “trust in”; and what we “confess”- and NOT by what we “do”. All of our “doing” (and we are *commanded* to do Good Deeds after we are saved) is nothing more than a weak and frail human *Response* to what God has already done in us- through the Miracle of the New Birth. And that means that what we believe- matters- *especially* about Essential Truth.

But Heresy and False Teaching attack Orthodoxy. And so, these Evils CANNOT forgive a single Sin or save a single soul. But they CAN and they DO keep lost people- lost. And they CAN also confuse and disturb and demoralize- saved people. And so, five things must be done with Heresy. It must be:

- ✓ Identified
- ✓ Confronted
- ✓ Exposed
- ✓ Denounced
- ✓ Cast out

... because an interesting aspect about all False Teaching and Heresy is that it originates from demons and CANNOT be killed by human means. The Apostle Paul taught his “son in the Faith”, Timothy about this in **1 Timothy 4:1**, when he said,

But the Spirit explicitly says that in later times some will fall away from the faith, paying attention to deceitful spirits and doctrines of demons,

Now genuinely saved people do NOT “fall away from the Faith” in the sense that they lost their Salvation. But this phrase is fulfilled in two different ways:

1. Saved people “fall away from the Faith” in the sense that they buy into false Teaching- to *some* degree. But God will sovereignly “see to it” that genuinely saved people will NEVER completely *apostatize*. So, God will either bring them back into “right believing” (Orthodoxy), or He will sovereignly “take them home” (Death)- to keep them from fully being deceived.

2. Lost people, who profess Salvation and are in the Church, “fall away from the Faith” in that they can wholeheartedly believe the Heresy and never be saved

Yet Heresy can't be killed, because it will *always* live in the mind and in the heart of *someone*. So, even though False Teaching *can* and *should be rejected, condemned, and thoroughly defeated* by the Church- it will simply go somewhere else. And that is *why* it must be taught to every succeeding generation.

Now all over the Bible- God the Holy Spirit described the Heretics as people who were evil and ungodly people, who *purposefully* went about to pervert the “Right Way of the Lord”. So, this is NOT people, who are sincere, but simply incorrect or contradictory or just wrong about what they believe and teach. Real Heretics are people, who are emissaries from satan- who have been *predestined* for Damnation. Jude described them like this:

- Certain persons... crept in unnoticed... those who were long beforehand marked out for this condemnation, ungodly persons who turn the grace of our God into licentiousness and deny our only Master and Lord, Jesus Christ. (Verse 4)
- These men, also by dreaming, defile the flesh, and reject authority, and revile angelic majesties. (Verse 8)
- These men revile the things which they do not understand; and the things which they know by instinct, like unreasoning animals, by these things they are destroyed. (Verse 10)
- Woe to them! For they have gone the way of Cain, and for pay they have rushed headlong into the error of Balaam, and perished in the rebellion of Korah. (Verse 11)
- These are the men who are hidden reefs in your love feasts when they feast with you without fear, caring for themselves; clouds without water, carried along by winds; autumn trees without fruit, doubly dead, uprooted; wild waves of the sea, casting up their own shame like foam; wandering stars, for whom the black darkness has been reserved forever. (Verses 12&13)
- These are grumblers, finding fault, following after their own lusts; they speak arrogantly, flattering people for the sake of gaining an advantage. (Verse 16)
- Mockers, following after their own ungodly lusts. These are the ones who cause divisions, worldly-minded, devoid of the Spirit. (Verses 18&19)

... so, genuine Heretics CANNOT be saved. And even though we are to call them to Repentance- these people are used by God to cause the Church to rise up out of its spiritual lethargy and to dig deep into the Scriptures to find Answers and Solutions (Doctrines) that will *defeat* the False Teaching.

Now the very *first* Heresy that attacked the simplicity of the biblical Gospel was an attack against the Grace of God. And to see how the Church handled this evil attack- let's go to **The Acts 15:1**:

Some men came down from Judea and began teaching the brethren, "Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved."

So, this was the "Heresy of the Judaizers" or the Heresy of "Legalism". These Heretics taught that God's Grace was NOT enough to save a lost sinner. So, this is when Grace is *ignored*. These "ungodly persons" taught that, in *addition* to Grace- a person had to add the good, religious Work of Circumcision to Grace- to make Grace *effective* in saving the lost person. So, in essence, they taught it was the Work- that *any* human could do without Grace- that made Grace powerful enough to save the soul. So, in effect, these people were saying that Grace- by itself- wasn't enough; that it wasn't strong enough by itself; and that God's Grace had to have help in saving souls- by adding human Works to it.

But, on the surface- it didn't seem that these men from Judea were publicly and blatantly *attacking* Grace- because they were teaching that Salvation did come through Grace. All they were doing was adding one single- humanly initiated Work to Grace- to make Grace *effective*.

Now keep in mind that Circumcision certainly IS in the Bible- in the Old Testament. And God absolutely DID command Moses to hold ALL male believers (as well as unbelievers), under the Old Covenant to that Standard. And by requiring men to be circumcised for Salvation in the New Testament Church- it might even curry Favor with the unbelieving Jews, who thought that Christianity (as well as Jesus Himself) was all about destroying what God had supernaturally given to Moses. And it might *lessen* or even *eliminate* the horrific Persecution that the people of the Church were enduring at the hands of the Jews. So, what makes this so wrong?

This Teaching *belittled* God's Grace by saying that the Grace of God is not enough to save the human soul. And since it is the display of God's Grace toward sinners- that glorifies God the *best* and the *most*- this Heresy was actually attacking the Glory of God.

Now most Legalists today don't require Circumcision. But they DO continue to attack the Grace of God by *requiring* that a lost person be baptized; or

partake of the Sacraments; or “make a Decision”; or to speak in tongues; or fly airplanes through buildings- to earn Heaven. So, Legalism teaches that lost people have to do *something- anything-* in order to make themselves attractive to God; or to curry Favor with God- so God will saved them

O, come on, Brother Blair, what’s the big deal? All these guys were doing was adding something that God gave to Moses. They weren’t making it up. I mean, after all, this would make sense to a lot of people- especially Jews. Why be so upset about it?

Well, first of all, I’m not the one who was initially upset about it. The Apostles were. And I’m not the one, who said that Legalism is a damnable Heresy- the Holy Bible did. So, I’m actually not initiating *anything-* I’m simply agreeing with Scripture.

Now the specific point at where these Heretic attacked the Grace of God in Salvation here in **The Acts 15-** was what God had commanded Moses in the Old Covenant about having all males circumcise the foreskin of their flesh. So, take note: These Heretics used the Bible- the Old Testament Scriptures- the Command of God- to try to prove that their False Teaching was correct.

And from that we can extrapolate a very serious Point: Not everything taught or even commanded under the Old Covenant is relevant in the New. Many things, that God gave to Moses and that was commanded under the Old Covenant, would actually be a Sin to do in the New Testament Church today. So, simply because some word or phrase is in the Bible- doesn’t mean it is Good or that we should employ it in the New Testament Church.

Now I want you to notice that the Church was already up and running when this Heresy entered in. And people were already being saved and were already being persecuted. The people of the Church were already being systematically *catechized* with the orthodox Apostle’s Teaching (**The Acts 2:42**); and those who were saved were already being progressively sanctified when this Heresy just seemed to come from nowhere.

And that is the nature of *all* Heresies. It pops up suddenly from people, who lay claim to be saved. And it comes in the form of a Teaching that supposedly will IMPROVE everybody’s Walk with God. So, Heresy comes into the Church; from people, who say they are saved; in the form of a Revelation from God; using the Bible; and making sense to people on certain levels. Now look at how the Church responded to this Heresy:

The Acts 15:2

And when Paul and Barnabas had great dissension and debate with them, the brethren determined that Paul and Barnabas and some others of them should go up to Jerusalem to the apostles and elders concerning this issue.

Notice that as soon as Paul and Barnabas heard about the Heresy- they immediately confronted the people bringing it. And the phrase, “**great dissention and debate**” has to do with an almost *violent* Confrontation. I can just imagine what this might have looked like. But suffice it to say that was a very *serious*; a very *earnest*; a very *forceful*; and a very *determined* Confrontation. So, this is not a light-hearted discussion over tea and crumpets.

Now why so serious and forceful? Because of what is at stake. Later on, Paul himself was moved by God the Holy Spirit to write down this- in **Galatians 1:6-9**:

6 I am amazed that you are so quickly deserting Him who called you by the grace of Christ, for a different gospel;

7 which is really not another; only there are some who are disturbing you and want to distort the gospel of Christ.

8 But even if we, or an angel from heaven, should preach to you a gospel contrary to what we have preached to you, he is to be accursed!

9 As we have said before, so I say again now, if any man is preaching to you a gospel contrary to what you received, he is to be accursed!

Now the word that was translated here as “**accursed**” comes from a Greek word (*anathema*; Strong's#331), that means: *Something that has been given up or devoted to Eternal Destruction for God's sake; Something that is in estrangement to Christ and His Salvation; Something appointed to Divine Condemnation.*

So, this has to do with a Teaching being so destructive; so wrong; and so evil that it rises to the level of being eternally damned by God- WITH NO HOPE OF EVER FINDING FORGIVENESS.¹ And Paul, in his capacity as an Apostle of Jesus placed this Eternal Damnation on ANYONE who preaches or teaches a “gospel” that is *different* from the “once-for-all-handed-down-to-the-saints” Gospel that Paul (and the other Apostles) received from the Lord and preached and taught to God's people. And this Anathema extended even to “**an angel from Heaven**”. So, this is literally about Heaven or Hell. People who buy into a real Heresy and are deceived by it- ARE NOT SAVED!

So, basically, what these heretics began to teach was that a saved Jew must *continue* in the Signs, Symbols, and Shadows of the Old Covenant; and a saved Gentile had to *first*, become a “good Jew”- *before* he could be a “good Christian”.

¹ At the Council of Trent (1545-1563), held to debate the Merits of the Protestant Reformation, the Roman Religious System, officially and formally pronounced an “Anathema” (Eternal Damnation) on “anyone who believes or teaches that Justification comes by Faith alone in Christ alone”. So, in effect, at this moment- this false church pronounced an Eternal Damnation on the Biblical Gospel- and became apostatized and fully isolated from the Authority of Scripture.

And the way they wanted these people to become good Jews was for the Leaders of the Church to teach that before a lost man can be saved- he must first be circumcised. Now look again at the *last* part of verse 2:

... the brethren determined that Paul and Barnabas and some others of them should go up to Jerusalem to the apostles and elders concerning this issue.

Now this is what is called, a “Church Council”. So, after the local Leaders confront the Issue- the Church should convene a “Council”- which is also called, the “Court of the Lord” which will meet to do four things:

1. Examine the Issue thoroughly
2. Call witnesses and hear their Testimony
3. Consult the Scriptures
4. Render a Verdict or Ruling

... and that Verdict or Ruling *MUST be “from the Scriptures and from the Scriptures alone”* (Sola Scriptura). And that is what they did. And so, this is the very first Church Council or Court of the Lord. And it is called, today, the “Council of Jerusalem”. Now look at what Dr. Luke wrote next:

The Acts 15:3&4

3 Therefore, being sent on their way by the church, they were passing through both Phoenicia and Samaria, describing in detail the conversion of the Gentiles, and were bringing great joy to all the brethren.

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

Now this is what is called, “Incontrovertible Evidence”. Paul and Barnabas took some of the recent Gentile converts, who lived in Phoenicia and Samaria and brought them to the Church in Jerusalem to prove that Gentiles were being saved- **WITHOUT** being circumcised.

Now, many times, as we read Accounts like this- we shake our heads and think, “*Why did they have to use these men? Why not simply use the Bible to prove their point?*” and there are at least two Answers to that Question:

1. The New Testament Books had yet been written
2. The Apostles had no Precedent to go by

... let’s examine both of these.

1. The New Testament Books had not yet been written

The Jerusalem Council occurred sometime between AD48 &50. And at that time- at best- only the **Epistle of James** was in print (AD 49). So, Paul's masterpiece where he taught Justification by Faith alone (**Romans**) and his Teaching from **Galatians** had not yet been written. In fact, the twin attacks against God's Grace (Legalism and Antinomianism) was one of the Reasons Paul was moved to write both of those Books.

2. The Apostles had no Precedent to go by

We must understand that what was going on during this time had never happened before. And so, there was no historic or Old Testament precedent that the Apostles could lean on- that would help them navigate through this time. Gentiles being saved was almost unheard of under the Old Covenant. There are a few examples- but they were few and far between. But there was no clear guidance that the Apostles had that would have prepared them for any of this.

And this should all give us great Hope. Because if ANYBODY *should* have failed in their Mission- the Apostles should have failed. They had to walk on paths that no human had ever walked on and they had to make huge and important decisions about eternal matters that no one had ever been confronted with. And yet they DIDN'T fail. God was truly with them- in a marvelous way- and they succeeded in establishing the Christian Church on the earth- EXACTLY the way Jesus told them to!

So, as they presented these living souls as Evidence of the Grace of God at work in bringing people into Christ's Kingdom- who didn't know *anything* about Jewish customs; or the Law of Moses; much less who were circumcised- that carried a lot of weight at the Jerusalem Council. Yet it wasn't enough. Look what happened next:

But some of the sect of the Pharisees who had believed stood up, saying, "It is necessary to circumcise them and to direct them to observe the Law of Moses."

Now why were the Pharisees even in the Church Council to begin with? Because the Apostles didn't have any historical or biblical precedent to go by- that taught them to *exclude* these unsaved Jews. Later on, they knew better; and the Church *excluded* lost people from Church Councils. But things like that had to be

developed over time- because Jesus didn't give them any details about *how* to go about this.

So, here, unsaved Jews, who didn't even believe in Jesus was God to begin with- "doubled down" on the heretical Teaching. Now what was the response by the Church Council?

The apostles and the elders came together to look into this matter.

Now we don't have any living Apostles in our day. So, how would we conduct a Church Council today? By using the Inspired, Infallible, and Inerrant *Words* of the Apostle: the New Testament Scriptures. So, what did they do?

7 After there had been much debate, Peter stood up and said to them, "Brethren, you know that in the early days God made a choice among you, that by my mouth the Gentiles would hear the word of the gospel and believe.

8 And God, who knows the heart, testified to them giving them the Holy Spirit, just as He also did to us;

9 and He made no distinction between us and them, cleansing their hearts by faith.

10 Now therefore why do you put God to the test by placing upon the neck of the disciples a yoke which neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear?

11 But we believe that we are saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, in the same way as they also are."

12 All the people kept silent, and they were listening to Barnabas and Paul as they were relating what signs and wonders God had done through them among the Gentiles. James's Judgment

13 After they had stopped speaking, James answered, saying, "Brethren, listen to me.

14 Simeon has related how God first concerned Himself about taking from among the Gentiles a people for His name.

15 With this the words of the Prophets agree, just as it is written,

16 'AFTER THESE THINGS I will return, AND I WILL REBUILD THE TABERNACLE] OF DAVID WHICH HAS FALLEN, AND I WILL REBUILD ITS RUINS, AND I WILL RESTORE IT,

17 SO THAT THE REST OF MANKIND MAY SEEK THE LORD, AND ALL THE GENTILES WHO ARE CALLED BY MY NAME,'

18 SAYS THE LORD, WHO MAKES THESE THINGS KNOWN FROM LONG AGO.

So at least six things were discussed and used to prove that Salvation was “by” God’s Grace ALONE; “through” the Gift of saving Faith ALONE; “in” Jesus Christ ALONE; to the Glory of God ALONE:

1. The Fulfillment of *Recent* Prophecy
2. The Gift of the Holy Spirit
3. Cleansing from Sin
4. The Weakness of the Law
5. The Performance of Signs and Wonders
6. The Fulfillment of *Ancient* Prophecy

1. The Fulfillment of *Recent* Prophecy

In **The Acts 15:7**, the Apostle Peter said:

"Brethren, you know that in the early days God made a choice among you, that by my mouth the Gentiles would hear the word of the gospel and believe.

Now back in **The Acts 10**- God made it abundantly clear to Peter that *whoever* God had chosen and had sovereignly made clean (saved) must NOT be rejected- but received as an equal heir of Eternal Life. God had given Peter a vision three times about a Gentile, who was chosen for Salvation. Now, normally Peter wouldn’t have even looked at Cornelius. Everything that Peter had been taught as a Jew told him that Gentiles were “spiritual dogs” and that God would never deal with them. But when God gave Peter that vision- Peter knew that God was going to save the Gentiles- by Grace and NOT by Works.

2. The Gift of the Holy Spirit

And God, who knows the heart, testified to them giving them the Holy Spirit, just as He also did to us; and He made no distinction between us and them...

By Peter saying that God Almighty “**knows the heart**”- he was *refuting* the Judaizers objection that, perhaps Cornelius wasn’t truly saved- even though Peter thought he was. But Peter destroyed their argument by saying that God had given Cornelius the Gift of the Holy Spirit- even though God knows the heart. In other words, God would have never given the Holy Spirit to dwell inside of Cornelius forever- if He knew that this Gentile wasn’t saved. And so, by “cleansing the

hearts” of Gentiles- BY FAITH- who had knowledge of the Old Testament and who were NOT circumcised- proved that Salvation was “by” the Grace of God and NOT by human Works.

3. Cleansing from Sin

... cleansing their hearts by faith.

These Gentiles were not made Righteous by their religious Works- but by the Grace of God and through the Gift of Faith.

4. The Weakness of the Law

**10 Now therefore why do you put God to the test by placing upon the neck of the disciples a yoke which neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear?
11 But we believe that we are saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, in the same way as they also are."**

Nobody was ever saved by keeping the Law of God. Nobody. The Law couldn't save *anyone*- because it was “Weak”. “*But, Brother Blair, God gave the Law- how was it ‘Weak’*”? It was weak to save anyone- NOT because anything in it was wrong- but because in order for the Law to save anyone- they had to obey it perfectly! So, the Law was “weak” in that it had to do with human co-operation. The Law of God had to be obeyed- in thought, word, and deed- 24 hours every day and 7 days every week- for your entire lifetime- with Joy- in order to save anyone. One area of disobedience- of one Commandment- one time- caused you to be nothing but a sinner- a transgressor of the Law. So, no matter how hard you might try- the weakness of the flesh defeated you. And so, the Law didn't have the ability to do *anything* but *condemn* you and *force* you to go to God in broken Humility; and beg Him for a Mercy you haven't earned; and a Grace you don't deserve- or you're doomed!

And everyone *knew* that- *especially* the Pharisees. But they were too proud and too hypocritical to admit it. So, Peter did- and it proved that Salvation was “by” God's Grace alone absent any human Works.

5. The Performance of Signs and Wonders

All the people kept silent, and they were listening to Barnabas and Paul as they were relating what signs and wonders God had done through them among the Gentiles.

Now notice that this is not about Signs and Wonders that the Gentiles were performing- but which the Apostles were performing *among* the Gentiles. And the reason this matters- is that this was the *Purpose* of both Signs and Wonders- to give Divine Credibility to the Revelation of the New Covenant. So, the fact that God was performing these supernatural Acts among the Gentiles through the Apostles- proved that God wanted the Gentiles to hear the Gospel and believe and be saved by Grace alone and NOT by Works

6. The Fulfillment of *Ancient* Prophecy

13 After they had stopped speaking, James answered, saying, "Brethren, listen to me.

14 Simeon has related how God first concerned Himself about taking from among the Gentiles a people for His name.

15 With this the words of the Prophets agree, just as it is written,

16 'AFTER THESE THINGS I will return, AND I WILL REBUILD THE TABERNACLE] OF DAVID WHICH HAS FALLEN, AND I WILL REBUILD ITS RUINS, AND I WILL RESTORE IT,

17 SO THAT THE REST OF MANKIND MAY SEEK THE LORD, AND ALL THE GENTILES WHO ARE CALLED BY MY NAME,'

18 SAYS THE LORD, WHO MAKES THESE THINGS KNOWN FROM LONG AGO.

Now what does the Prophecy by Amos- given almost 700 years earlier have to do with God saving Gentiles? Because Amos said,

SO THAT THE REST OF MANKIND MAY SEEK THE LORD, AND ALL THE GENTILES WHO ARE CALLED BY MY NAME,'

So, this was the Evidence that was presented at the first Church Council. So, now- all that remained was for the Council to make their official and formal Ruling:

The Acts 15:13&14, 19-21

13 After they had stopped speaking, James answered, saying, "Brethren, listen to me.

14 Simeon has related how God first concerned Himself about taking from among the Gentiles a people for His name.

19 Therefore it is my judgment that we do not trouble those who are turning

**to God from among the Gentiles,
20 but that we write to them that they abstain from things contaminated by
idols and from fornication and from what is strangled and from blood.
21 For Moses from ancient generations has in every city those who preach
him, since he is read in the synagogues every Sabbath."**

So, here, God used the very first Pastor of the Church at Jerusalem, James, to make this Ruling from the very first Church Council.² Now, remember as you read this- the Books of the New Testament had not been written yet- with the possible exception of the Book that James himself wrote. And that is the only reason James references Moses and the Sabbath.

Now after the Council made its Ruling look what they did:

**22 Then it seemed good to the apostles and the elders, with the whole church,
to choose men from among them to send to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas
—Judas called Barsabbas, and Silas, leading men among the brethren,
23 and they sent this letter by them, "The apostles and the brethren who are
elders, to the brethren in Antioch and Syria and Cilicia who are from the
Gentiles, greetings.**

**24 "Since we have heard that some of our number to whom we gave no
instruction have disturbed you with their words, unsettling your souls,
25 it seemed good to us, having become of one mind, to select men to send to
you with our beloved Barnabas and Paul,
26 men who have risked their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.
27 Therefore we have sent Judas and Silas, who themselves will also report
the same things by word of mouth.**

**28 For it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to lay upon you no greater
burden than these essentials:**

**29 that you abstain from things sacrificed to idols and from blood and from
things strangled and from fornication; if you keep yourselves free from such
things, you will do well. Farewell."**

Now why did they write this Letter? To make sure that the Heresy of Legalism would never find fertile soil in *any* Church. And the things that the Council commanded were simply important Issues that mattered to the people of the early Church.

² The fact that James and NOT Peter took the lead here shows us that Peter was NOT looked at as being the "First among equals" as is taught- at least not at this time.

Now please take note that the Council did NOT say that by doing these things- it would save anyone- but rather that people, who were already saved would NOT do these things.

Now look at the result that this brought about:

So when they were sent away, they went down to Antioch; and having gathered the congregation together, they delivered the letter. When they had read it, they rejoiced because of its encouragement.

... and we need to maintain this Essential Truth in our day.

So, this is the inspired account of how the Church initially confronted and defeated the vicious attack against the Grace of God called, the Heresy of Legalism. And this battle forever established the spiritual Precedent that we hold dear today: Lost souls are rescued from God's Wrath and saved by Grace alone; through Faith alone- to the Glory of God alone- and NOT by any human Works. And may God grant that we will ever be diligent to preserve this Truth in our hearts.

Amen. Let's pray.

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The Grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit. Amen. Be watchful and quicken your pace. Soli Deo Gloria. For the Glory of God alone.

