

Sermon Title: Saved Through The Grace of the Lord Jesus, Pt. 1
Scripture Text: Acts 15:6-15 (Acts #35)

Speaker: Jim Harris
Date: 2-25-24

Now it is time to turn in our Bibles to Acts Chapter 15, where we are looking at this famous record of this famous gathering known as the Jerusalem Council.

We are in Chapter 15 here, and as we finish this chapter in the next week or so and move into Chapter 16, we will get into Paul's Second Missionary Journey, where his travelling companion is Silas. Paul and Silas land in jail in Philippi; and God does a miracle to get them out; and the jailer thinks, "I'm a dead man—you know, I couldn't even keep people in my prison"; and he finds out that they are still there, he has heard their testimonies, their singing of the praises of God all night; and so he says obviously the most important question in the entire Book of Acts: Acts Chapter 16, Verse 30, speaking to Paul and Silas: "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" And the answer was quite clear: "They said, 'Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household.'" And he "believed," and he was saved; and they went to his "household," and they "believed," and they were saved (vs. 34). Well, today, we dive into this momentous Jerusalem Council, which explains *why* the answer to that question is so *clear* and so simple.

I remember back to an afternoon when I had an appointment with a man in his thirties. I had met him just briefly at church the Sunday prior. He made an appointment to come and talk to me. He was deeply troubled. He wore a number of those psychological labels so popular these days that I was talking about a few weeks back; he was labeled with "anxiety," "depression," "alcoholism"—I don't think "PTSD" was cool yet back then; he probably would have been wearing that label as well. And he was searching for help to stop feeling so badly.

Well, I knew where this conversation had to go, so I was ready to steer it there; and I got a chance to ask him if he knew the Gospel—because I figured this needs to be the basics, the essentials of the Gospel. And his answer was *shockingly accurate*. His parents were believers. He had grown up in the church. And I said, "What is the Gospel?" And he said, "Well, as I understand it, something like: God created everything good. Then man rebelled and messed it all up. We are all sinners because we descended from Adam and Eve, so we are all alienated from God. But God sent His Son Jesus to die to pay the penalty for our sins so we can be saved if we believe in what Jesus did for us." And I thought, "I can't counsel you. You ought to just *preach* on Sunday morning!"

I knew that was his background, so I asked if *he* had put *his* faith in Jesus Christ, and asked to be saved. And he said he had not. So I asked, "Why haven't you turned to Christ, since you understand what the Gospel is?" Well, that was the button that we pushed that started the story pouring out, and it was centered on his years in the military. He had served with Special Forces at the highest level in some extreme circumstances. He spared me the details, but it was quite clear that what he had seen and what he had done was *miles* beyond anything that most of us have ever experienced or ever will experience, and he was *crippled* under a load of guilt. When I said, "Why haven't you come to Christ?" he said, "You don't understand what I have done. Now, I'm not going to inflict any more of the details on you than I already have, but it is what I've done that keeps me from becoming a Christian!" And I said to him, "You're thinking backward. Your sin is not what should *keep* you from Christ, it should drive you *to* Him, because *He* is your only hope! He is the only answer! He is the One who will save you!"

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Now, it wasn't because *I* said anything profound, but the Holy Spirit used those words; and by the time that meeting was over, he *did* cry out to the Lord to save him. It was a *very* emotional scene—this manly man, crying and sobbing and pouring his heart out to the Lord. I think it was a sincere conversion. Alas, our ways parted; I never saw him again. If you recognize that story and it's you, and you are here, would you come talk to me? I would like to find out what you've been doing the last couple of decades. But I will always remember that conversation, how it illustrates the *devilish lie* that says, "You have to be *good enough* to be *worthy enough* for Christ to forgive you and save you." That's *wrong!* You *cannot* be worthy of His grace! If you could, then it would not be "grace"—it would be the merit system, and you would have earned it (Rom. 11:6; cf. Rom. 4:4-5).

What you have to do in order to be saved *is* the issue that had to be resolved following Paul's First Missionary Journey, during which time countless Gentiles had come to faith in Christ. And if you remember, then along came some Jews who had professed to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, but *they* said that you needed to be circumcised—which was the last step of converting to Judaism—you had to be a convert to Judaism and keep the Law of Moses if you were ever to become a Christian. We saw Chapter 15, Verse 1—"Some men came down"—that is, "down" to Antioch—"from Judea"—that is, from Jerusalem—"and began teaching the brethren, 'Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.' " (NASB-1995—and throughout, unless otherwise noted) "You have to be a Jew in order to become a Christian!"—that was their message. Now, when that bomb was dropped in the church in Antioch, amidst the rejoicing over the Gentiles who had become Christians, *immediately* everyone there said, "We have to resolve this! We can't let this two-gospel system *ever* get any traction." (cf. Gal. 1:6-9)

So, Verse 2 of Acts 15—we saw this last time: "And when Paul and Barnabas had great dissension and debate with them..." This was *not* a friendly conversation! Mutually exclusive and contradictory definitions of the Gospel were put forth. "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." The question—the "issue": Is salvation by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone, or is there something to be added? Is there a prerequisite? Is there an *addition* to that? We are going to see what unfolded at this crucial meeting of the early church leaders.

I very carefully outlined where I wanted to go today—and we are not going to get there, but here is a good outline if we *did* get this far; this will be for today and, Lord willing, next Lord's Day:

- Number 1: The Group Debates The Matter
- Number 2: Peter Declares The Background
- Number 3: Paul And Barnabas Detail Conversions
- Number 4: James Delivers The Sermon
- Number 5: The Church Drafts Judas And Silas
- Number 6: The Church Dictates The Letter
- Number 7: The Men Deliver The Letter

We will get there, but just not all of it today.

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It seems there were two variations of the teaching which caused the problem. Both of them have appropriately been labeled "Judaizing," or, the teaching of the "Judaizers" who were trying to make the Gospel *specifically* [for] and limited to Jews only.

The ones who initially stirred up the trouble—and actually *went* to those same places that Paul and Barnabas had gone, and then came to Antioch—they were saying: "You have to become a Jew *first* in order to become a Christian." And that most extreme position seems to have been saying: "Jesus belongs to the Jews, so if you want any of what He offers, you have to first become a Jew."

The somewhat milder version is alluded to down in Verse 5, and it is attributed to "some" among "the Pharisees who had believed." And it might be that they didn't say, "You have to become a Jew *before* you can be a Christian," but they were saying, "If you become a Christian, you are going to actually start acting like a Jew: You need to also receive circumcision and keep the Jewish laws."

As we left off last week, it was at Verse 5—"But some of the sect of the Pharisees who had believed"—so, they seem to have genuinely put faith in Christ, but they really got it wrong on what that meant. They "stood up, saying, 'It is necessary to circumcise them'—antecedent: all those Gentiles who had believed—"and to direct them to observe the Law of Moses.' " Now, even if that was a less extreme version, it was still a corruption of the Gospel.

So, Number 1: The Group Debates The Matter

Verse 6—"The apostles and the elders came together to look into this matter. After there had been much debate..." They had a big "debate."

Now, in addition to those who came from Antioch—that was Paul and Barnabas and the unnamed other ones who joined them, probably other elders from that church—they came and met with "the apostles and the elders."

"The apostles" is a very small, very specific group (Acts 1:21-22; 1 Cor. 9:1; Rev. 21:14): It was "the twelve" chosen by Jesus (Matt. 10:1-4), minus Judas Iscariot (Acts 1:15-20), plus "Matthias" (Acts 1:26), plus Paul, the special Apostle to the "Gentiles" (Rom. 11:13; Gal. 2:8; 1 Tim. 2:7). Yeah, I know: In the last chapter, Barnabas was also nicknamed an apostle; he was serving right alongside the Apostle (Acts 14:14). Sometimes close associates of the original Apostles were sort of the small "a" apostles, sort of the apostolic messengers (e.g., Rom. 16:7).

Ever since the generation of "the Apostles," the church has been led by those known as "the elders." There were *very few* Apostles; they were *only* at the "foundation" of the church (Eph. 2:20; cf. Rev. 21:14). Those who say that the position of "Apostle" has been passed on from generation to generation *made that up*; that is not true. *There are no Apostles today*; there haven't been since the Apostle John, who was the last of the ones to go and be with the Lord.

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So, *very* few Apostles, *only* in that first generation. But on the other hand, in *every congregation* since then, there are "elders." They are also called—and in a later portion in Acts, we will get into some more of the details of this; it's pretty cool to see—the "elders" are also called "overseers" (Acts 20:28; Phil. 1:1; 1 Tim. 3:1-2; Titus 1:7), and they are also called "shepherds" (Acts 20:28; 1 Pet. 5:2; cf. Jer. 3:15). By the way: The Latin equivalent of "shepherd" is "pastor" (Eph. 4:11)—"pastor" simply means "shepherd."

"Shepherd" or "pastor" describes the function of the elders: They are responsible for the care and the feeding of souls (see Jn. 21:15-17). The word "overseer"—which in some older translations is also translated "bishop"—that describes the responsibility; you can hear it in the word "overseer": They are to watch over and manage, if you will—guide the affairs of the church. And "elder" describes their spiritual character and qualifications. All three of those describe the same office called "elders."

Well before the Apostles had all passed from the scene, God was already raising up "elders" in every church (e.g., Titus 1:5), including the church in Jerusalem. And through the Apostle Paul and the Apostle Peter, eventually quite a bit of instruction was given to all the congregations for recognizing elders, and instruction was given to the elders as to what they needed to do. If you remember back to Chapter 14, Paul and Barnabas, as they returned from that farthest point of the First Missionary Journey, they came back to those churches they had planted, and they "appointed elders" in every city (vs. 23). So already, that transition was in place.

But these men "came together," and they had "much debate." Here were the most learned and passionate men of God, confronted with an opposition, and they came together to discuss the most important question for all mankind for all time. Oh, I wish Luke had given us a transcript! The Bible would be pretty long, if he had. We will just have to live with our curiosity about what actually went on there. But we *do* know what the decision was, and that is what we are heading for today.

And from this announcement of the decision of the Jerusalem Council, we can learn a principle that is transferrable from first-century Jerusalem to twenty-first-century Idaho; we can apply this in *all* places that we serve in ministry: The matters of the doctrine and the definitions of the essentials of the faith were decided by the leaders, and then communicated to the people.

Now we have the completed Scripture—the job is not as difficult as it once was—but understand, what we are saying is: *The church is not a democracy!* There are some denominations that practice a church polity—a church policy, organization--called "congregationalism," which basically says *everybody* has equal voice, equal authority. That is not the way the church is designed (see 1 Thess. 5:12; 1 Tim. 5:17; Heb. 13:17). This was an early illustration of the functioning of the Body of Christ. It was not the Hegelian idea of "thesis and antithesis," and then we get together and argue it out until we come up with a "synthesis"—which is neither what you said nor what you said, but it is something in the middle that nobody likes. That's how congress used to work—now they just don't work at all.

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But these people ["the apostles and the elders"] came together and said, "What does God say? What is the Gospel?" And then the entire congregation was gathered to hear the decisions of the leaders. There were speeches made by Peter, and then Paul and Barnabas, and then James.

So, The Group Debates The Matter, and then we come to Peter. Isn't it a shock: Peter was the first one to talk. Yes and no. "No" because we know Peter was *always* the one who spoke first, *but* I think this was the design of "the apostles and the elders"! "Let's first start with Peter."

And he begins by recalling the momentous event that we have already studied, back in Chapter 10. That is where Peter brought the Gospel to a group of Gentiles gathered in the home of a man named Cornelius in the city of Caesarea. And to prepare him for it, God gave Peter that profound vision when he was in Joppa.

Now here is Luke's summary of what Peter said, starting in Verse 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. 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, cleansing their hearts by faith. 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? But we believe that we are saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, in the same way as they also are.' " (vss. 7-11)

Here are the points that Peter put on his power-point that day: "It was God's choice to send the Gospel to the Gentiles. We didn't *vote*, 'Let's expand into Gentile territory.' This was God's choice."

Secondly: It was God's choice for *Peter* to preach to the first group of Gentiles who believed, just as Peter preached to the first group of *Jews* who believed—same guy, same message; different groups, same result.

The message that was preached was exactly the same message that he preached to the Jews. The response, when they believed, was that God sent "the Holy Spirit" to indwell the *Gentile* believers *just as He did* the Jewish believers. So, says Peter, there is "*no distinction* between" how Jews are saved and how Gentiles are saved; because in every case, says Peter, "cleansing" and forgiveness comes "by faith" *alone*.

Therefore, it is *absurd*, and it is hypocritical, to demand that the Gentiles keep the Law that Israel *utterly failed* to keep! "*We failed!* The Law showed us our sin, just the way it is supposed to be. So, how dare we put this *burden* on the Gentiles that *we* could never carry!"

So the punchline was: "We are saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, in the same way as they also are."

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Now, I want to pause for a moment, and help you remember something about the context of this in history: It is *very important* to remember that the Book of Acts is the record of *transitions* that happened in specific time over about a 40-year period.

I listed the main ones back when we began the Book of Acts. There is a transition from the Gospels to the Epistles—from the life of Jesus to the instructions to the churches. There's the transition from Judaism to Christianity (Heb. 8:13; cf. Matt. 21:43; Rom. 11:25), the transition from the Mosaic Law to the Church Age (Matt. 16:18; Eph. 3:4-6), the transition from the ministry of Christ to the ministry of His agents (Matt. 10:40; Lk. 10:16; Jn. 13:20; 1 Jn. 4:6)—the "Apostles," the "evangelists," the "pastors" and the "teachers" (Eph. 4:11)—and there is the transition from Israel to "the world" as the center of activity for God's work on Earth (Rom. 11:12; cf. Is. 49:6; Jn. 10:16; Acts 1:8).

So, three words to keep in mind as we work through Acts that will always keep you on track are these: Continuity, Discontinuity, and Transition.

There is perfect continuity in the Bible. It is "progressive revelation"—not starting at "wrong" and progressing to "right," but starting at incomplete and progressing to complete (see Jn. 16:12; Rom. 16:25-26; Eph. 3:4-5; Col. 1:26). And it is a continuous story of Creation, Fall, Redemption, and Re-creation—all worked out in human history.

Now, at several points *within* that continuity of "progressive revelation," there is *discontinuity*. Sometimes things are set aside—as in: the Law; that's a big deal. Some things replace some of what is set aside at some of the points of discontinuity (Heb. 8:13; 10:8-9); and at every turning point, new things are revealed.

But at every point of that *discontinuity* within the continuity, there is a period of *transition*. In some places, the transition is immediate—as in: the day *before* the Fall, and the day *after* the Fall; sudden, total change of everything.

Sometimes it is longer. The longest one: There was a 120-year run-up to the Flood. Then the Flood itself and the aftermath of the Flood took well over a year. That was a pretty big transition, from a couple billion people to, well—"eight" as the population of the planet (1 Pet. 3:20).

Giving the Law after God brought Israel out of their bondage in Egypt. Giving the Law—the process spanned 40 days, and that was followed by a period of time to construct the Tabernacle, and *then* all the sacrifices and the whole system was implemented.

The birth of Jesus—there's the *biggest* change of all, so far. The birth of Jesus was preceded by the birth of John the Baptist, His forerunner. Their ministries overlapped by about six months—there's a transition. And the ministry of Jesus overall lasted more than three years; and then there was another 40-day period; and then, after His ascension and then a few more days, then the arrival of the Holy Spirit; and now, the era of the New Covenant is *fully* in force for all who believe—not yet for the nation of Israel—and the time of the Old Covenant is fully passed (Heb. 8:7-13): discontinuity that required a transition.

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Peter was the first main spokesman in this new era. Then came Stephen, then Philip, then Saul—who became Paul—he preached for some time right after his conversion, then vanished for a while. Then back to Peter for that big day in Caesarea, and all the ripples of that event. Then the focus turned fulltime to the Gentile church in Antioch of Syria, and it was from there that Paul and Barnabas were sent out on the First Missionary Journey. Then came this momentous meeting in Jerusalem. The rest of the Book of Acts now, after this, is going to focus on the ministry of Paul. Peter fades from view completely, until we see him, not in the Book of Acts, but writing his epistles—guess what?—to many of the same places that Paul went, and to the same people that he preached to and planted churches [among] (see 2 Pet. 3:15).

My point is: This transition period lasted about *40 years*. It was not fully completed until the Apostle John wrote his five books of the New Testament, and the canon was completed (Rev. 22:18; cf. Prov. 30:6; Jude 3), and God took John home. By then, the Body of Christ was far more Gentile than Jewish; and, as a matter of fact, the Temple in Jerusalem had been destroyed. Talk about discontinuity! Talk about a transition! And so, understand: This was a pivotal *day* in a pivotal *time* of potential disaster in the midst of a pivotal transition that lasted 40 years.

There is one more point from Peter's message that I think should also be highlighted, because some of Peter's words here are the death knell to *any* excuse for racism on the part of anyone who names the name of Christ. Chapter 15, Verse 9—"and He [God] made no distinction between us and them, cleansing their hearts by faith."

It is pretty clear that the words mean that God makes *no distinction whatsoever* between the spiritual needs of Jews, the spiritual needs of Gentiles, and the Gospel that brings the solution to those needs. If that is so in the most *profound* racial divide in all of history—you don't *get* bigger than Jew and Gentile: *no* interaction, mutual hatred—if it is true of *that* (Is. 49:6; Rom. 15:8-12; Eph. 2:11-18; 3:6), then it certainly applies to all the little relatively tiny distinctions between languages, cultures—and silliest of all: the level of melanin that people have in their skin (Acts 10:34-35; Rev. 5:9). There is one and only one Gospel (Gal. 1:6-9): It is the message of salvation for every person (Gal. 3:28; Col. 3:11), everywhere (Matt. 28:19-20; Mk. 16:15; Lk. 24:47).

There is *one race* on this planet: the *human* race. It is a fallen race, because its progenitors—Adam and Eve (Gen. 3:20; Acts 17:26)—fell, rebelled against God. We are *born* "dead" in the sin that we have inherited from them (Eph. 2:1; cf. Ps. 51:5; 58:3; Rom. 5:12).

Now, there *are* two kinds of people: There are saved people and lost people (Eph. 2:4-5; 1 Jn. 3:10; Rev. 20:15). Otherwise, we are all of the same ilk (Eph. 2:3; Titus 3:3). And what transfers you from one to the other? What "transfers" you "from the domain of darkness...to the kingdom of His beloved Son"? (Col. 1:13) It is the Gospel of Jesus Christ (Acts 26:18).

So, The Group comes together and Debates The Matter. Peter gets up and Declares The Background. Next: Paul and Barnabas Detail Conversions.

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Now, nothing succeeds like success, so you want the testimonies of the people who bought the product and say it's wonderful—or, got their lives changed, and tell you the Gospel is true. Jesus is "the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father but through [Him]" (Jn. 14:6); and so, hearing the stories of people who once were lost and now are saved—that's a never-ending source of encouragement for Christians.

And so, to continue to assuage the fears and to refute the arguments of those who wanted to continue to give a spiritual stiff-arm to the Gentiles, Paul and Barnabas spoke next. And in their case, Luke also didn't record what they said. But, you know what? He didn't need to. We already have Chapter 13 and Chapter 14, which tells us all about that whole missionary journey. So in Chapter 15, Verse 12, we are simply told: "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."

Why the emphasis on "signs and wonders"? Because, as Paul would later write—after he planted a church in Corinth, and then went away, and then started writing letters to them, and wrote the second recorded letter to them—Second Corinthians 12:12—"The signs of a true apostle were performed among you with all perseverance, by signs and wonders and miracles" (cf. Acts 5:12) So, part of the message of Paul and Barnabas that day at the Jerusalem Council served to point out that not only was it the same message of the same Apostles, with the same results of born-again people, it was also the same *validation* from God by these miracles that "These are My messengers," God says to them (see Acts 2:22; 14:3; Heb. 2:4).

Next comes the summary of the main sermon that was delivered that day. Peter gave The Background; Paul and Barnabas said, "Here's kind of the foreground. Here is the testimony of all these that have just come to faith in Christ." The next speaker was James.

Now, there are five Jameses mentioned in the New Testament; you have to keep them straight. Remember: *This* James is not James the Apostle, because *he* had come down with a case of death—he was murdered already in the Book of Acts. It is not the other Apostle that Jesus chose, named James—sometimes nicknamed "James the Less" because we know less about him, or maybe he was a short guy—probably so. There is no record of what he did after that.

This is the best-known James, once "James" the "brother" of "John," "the son of Zebedee" (Matt. 4:21) was murdered (Acts 12:2). "James" the "brother" of Jesus (Matt. 13:55; cf. Gal. 1:19) had quickly become the de facto leader of the church at Jerusalem.

He was not a *follower* of Christ during Jesus' ministry (Jn. 7:5). Can you imagine the amount of resentment that built up when, in *every* situation of *anything* that happens in your family, your big brother is *always right*, and you are *always wrong*? The brothers and sisters of Jesus had a little problem with Him, until He rose from the dead—and they said, "Oh! I see!" and they became His followers. And James became the leader of the church at Jerusalem.

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You see, the Apostles were called to "go out"—"apostle" means "sent with a message." They were "sent" to take the "message." But somebody had to anchor the home front. James was the main guy, who apparently was the leader among all of the elders of the church at Jerusalem.

So, next step is: James Delivers The Sermon

The sermon that you are going to see from James, the half-brother of Jesus, as it is recorded here—it is a summary; we don't have a transcript of any of these sermons; these are all summaries in the Book of Acts. But this summary here shows that this sermon connects what was going on at that time to the plan of God as revealed in the Old Testament (see Acts 26:22). That is always the pattern of the main sermons in the Book of Acts: This is the work of God unfolding in our time for us.

So this is the third speech given on that day, all of which declare that salvation is by faith alone for both Jews and Gentiles.

So come down to Verse 13 of Chapter 15 with me: "After they had stopped speaking, James answered, saying, 'Brethren, listen to me. Simeon has related how God first concerned Himself about taking from among the Gentiles a people for His name' " (vss. 13-14).

It is *very* important that James spoke. James was—for the number of years now that there had been a church in Jerusalem, he has been the most recognized spokesman. Oh, Peter preached the evangelistic sermons, but James was "the guy." And so, those "Pharisees who had believed"—they had no choice but to accept what came from James and Peter, especially (cf. Gal. 2:9). And as the other Apostles scattered, James stayed there. So he was the chairman of this great assembly, and he could stand up and say, "Brethren, listen to me"—and they would.

He began with a summary of what Peter had said earlier. And did you notice something interesting? He said: "*Simeon* has related how God first concerned Himself about taking from among the Gentiles a people for His name." "Simeon" was Peter's *Jewish* name. James is doing everything he can to not poke those on the other side—who were proclaiming that you had to keep the Law—he didn't want to poke them in the eye. "Simeon"—this guy Simon Peter, this guy who was with Jesus this whole time, this guy who preached those first messages to us—"related how God had" called "Gentiles" to Himself. So, obviously, he agrees with what Peter had recounted. And it seems that James was quite wise to avoid anything that would *automatically* alienate those believing Pharisees. This wasn't the day to drive them out, this was the day to educate them and bring them into the work (see Acts 11:18). He did not want to throw any further gas on the fire of the arguments of the Judaizers.

So, the body of James' sermon which he is about to preach, as summarized here by the pen of Luke, comes from Amos Chapter 9, Verses 11 and 12. And if you are sitting there thinking, "Oh, yeah! Amos 9—oh, yeah, *that's the one!*"—I want to talk to you, because you have something going on here that is *good!*

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He is going to show that God is doing *exactly* what He says. The argument that James is going to present is accurate. Obviously, it had been discussed among the whole group. It is presented brilliantly. And the bottom line is that what began among the Gentiles through Peter—which has now *erupted* through the ministry of Paul and Barnabas—it was predicted long ago by God (cf. Is. 49:6; Acts 26:22).

Now, as I suspected when I built the outline on this section, we are not going to finish it this morning. Good—my week is a little bit easier; I don't need to come up with a new sermon title or a new outline; just change it to "Part 2."

I think you know where we are headed, and it is okay if you want to read ahead. Verse 15—"With this"—everything that Paul has said, and Barnabas has said, and Peter has said—"With this the words of the Prophets agree, just as it is written..." Next Lord's Day, Lord willing, we will see what James read and preached on from the Book of Amos.

But we need to make sure that we respond as God would have us to respond here. I love knowing the *details* of that 40-year transition! I love getting out my magnifying glass and looking at the theology of all that they said. But *don't miss the point*: There were people there who *said* they believed in Jesus Christ, but they *twisted* the Gospel—they *added* to the Gospel.

Let's focus our attention for a couple of minutes on the most important matter at hand: Are *you* saved? (see 2 Cor. 13:5; 2 Pet. 1:10)

Now, I see familiar faces here. Many of you—I *know* your testimony of faith in Jesus Christ. But how did they describe the ones who provoked this whole thing? Certain ones "of the sect of the Pharisees *who had believed*"—they had *said*, "We believe Jesus is the Messiah," but they missed the point (cf. Jn. 2:23-25; 6:64; 8:31; 1 Cor. 15:2).

My friend, as you came into this world, you are completely without merit before God (Rom. 3:10; cf. Ps. 58:3; Is. 64:6). Not only are you without merit—spiritually, you are "dead in your trespasses and sins" (Eph. 2:1). You are the *enemy* of God (Rom. 5:10).

We are just getting *inundated* with babies here, and we always talk about "that cute little baby, so innocent." I know what you mean, but you're *wrong*! No! The problem with these babies is their *parents*, who are *sinners*! (Ps. 51:5; 1 Cor. 15:22) Those babies need to be brought to faith in Christ!

And the cool thing is: Even though we are born enemies of God, He invites you to be delivered from the grip of "sin" (Jn. 8:34-36; 11:25-26; Rom. 6:17-18; cf. Matt. 11:28; Jn. 7:37-38). He invites you to be delivered from the eternal consequences of your sin (Matt. 25:41; Jn. 3:18a; 5:24).

That same Apostle Paul—eventually, he will get around to the Second [Missionary] Journey and the Third [Missionary] Journey, and he will be writing letters to all of those churches, and one of them he is going to write is the Book of Romans. The question is: Are you saved?

Sermon Title: Saved Through The Grace of the Lord Jesus, Pt. 1
Scripture Text: Acts 15:6-15 (Acts #35)

Speaker: Jim Harris
Date: 2-25-24

Romans 5:8-10 puts it this way: "But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners"—we weren't even *born*—"Christ died for us. Much more then, having now been justified by His blood, we shall be saved from the wrath of God through Him." "The wrath of God" is *coming* (Rom. 1:18; Eph. 5:6; Col. 3:6), and you don't want *any part of it!* "For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God through the death of His Son, much more, having been reconciled, we shall be saved by His life."

And he boiled it down to one glorious sentence at the end of Chapter 6 of Romans: "For the wages of sin is death"—"wages" are what you have *earned* (Rom. 4:4), it is what you "deserve" (Is. 3:11); you have a right to demand your "wages"—"The wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God"—a "free gift" you *cannot* earn—"the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord" (vs. 23).

As I said to that man across the desk from me years ago: Have you cried out to God to forgive *you*? Have you turned from your sin (Is. 55:7; Acts 17:30; 26:20) and from your "love" of the things of this "world" (1 Jn. 2:15), to "love" Him and serve Him above all else? (Mk. 12:30; cf. Matt. 10:37-39) Is *that* your testimony?

Or again, as Paul summarized it yet another time, in Ephesians 2—those very familiar words—"For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one may boast" (vss. 8-9). If *that* is not how you describe yourself today—if you have any inkling that "God sure is lucky to have me; why, I'm better than 46.3 percent of the people in the world"—if Ephesians 2 is not how you describe yourself, if that isn't what you believe, "today" is the day for you to turn to Christ (Heb. 3:5-6; cf. 2 Cor. 6:2).

I receive probably around 150 to 200 e-mails a week. I delete about 150 to 200 e-mails a week. The exception is ones that I save and that I go back to. One of those I got this week. Don't tell any of the ladies in Megan's Bible study that she copies me in everything she writes to you guys, so I eavesdrop on your e-mails from her. And this week, she included a prayer from the famous Puritan collection of prayers titled "The Valley of Vision." Listen to this. And remember, the question on the table is: "Are you saved?" Here is what some dear brother from centuries ago wrote: "Thou blessed Spirit, author of all grace and comfort, come, work repentance in my soul. Represent sin to me in its odious colors, that I may hate it. Melt my heart by the majesty and mercy of God. Show me my ruined self, and the help there is in Him. Teach me to behold my Creator, His ability to save, His arms outstretched, His heart big for me. May I confide in His power and love, commit my soul to Him without reserve, bear His image, observe His laws, pursue His service, and be, through time and eternity, a monument to the efficacy to His grace, a trophy of His victory. Make me willing to be saved in this way, perceiving nothing in myself but all in Jesus! Help me not only to receive Him, but to walk in Him, depend upon Him, commune with Him, be conformed to Him, follow Him—imperfect, but still pressing forward, not complaining of labor but valuing rest, not murmuring under trials but thankful for my state. Give me a faith which is the means of salvation, and the principle and medium of all goodness. May I be saved by grace through faith, live by faith, feel the joy of faith, do the work of faith. Perceiving nothing in myself, may I find in Christ wisdom, righteousness, sanctification, redemption."

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Got it? Let's pray:

Father, thank You for Your infinite, indescribable grace to us in Christ. Thank You that it is by faith that we stand in Your grace. Thank You for the promise of final redemption. Thank You for the strength to walk through this life, where we walk by faith. Have Your way with us, Father, to invite others into this company of the faithful ones. And Father, please, do not let a soul leave this place today apart from this beautiful standing that we have in Christ. That is our prayer in Jesus' name. Amen.