



Summary

What does it truly mean to be saved by grace? Acts 15 brings us into one of the most consequential moments in the early church, the Jerusalem Conference, where the very foundation of the gospel was on the line. A group of Jewish believers had begun insisting that Gentile converts must first be circumcised and follow the law of Moses to be saved. The response to this challenge teaches us something profound: defending grace is not just a theological exercise, it is itself an act of grace. We see leaders on opposing sides of a deeply charged debate choosing to sit together, listen, and reason through the Word of God rather than fracture the community. The Greek word used for their dispute actually means mutual questioning, a reminder that passionate disagreement and genuine unity are not mutually exclusive. At the heart of this gathering is a question that still echoes in our own lives: are we trying to earn what has already been freely given? Peter's words cut through the tension when he points out that the law was a yoke neither the Jewish fathers nor their own generation could bear. This is not an abstract doctrinal point. It is an honest confession that resonates with anyone who has ever exhausted themselves trying to be good enough. The Jerusalem Conference invites us to stop straining under that weight and to rest in the finished work of Christ.





Points

Title: Gracefully Defending Grace: The Jerusalem Conference and Salvation by Faith Alone

Sermon Summary: Drawing primarily from Acts 15, this sermon examines the Jerusalem Conference, a pivotal moment in early church history where the question of whether Gentiles must follow the law of Moses to be saved was formally resolved. The pastor argues that salvation is entirely by grace through faith in Christ alone, that no works, sacraments, or religious observances can add to or take away from what Christ accomplished on the cross. Using Peter's testimony, James's Spirit-led wisdom, and Paul's own writings, the sermon demonstrates that both Jews and Gentiles are saved by the same grace, and that the law's primary purpose is to reveal human sinfulness and point every person toward the need for a Savior. The sermon calls believers to extend sensitivity toward those from different religious backgrounds while firmly holding to the doctrine of grace, and closes with an evangelistic invitation for anyone still trusting in works-based religion to place their faith in Christ alone.

Key Points:

- - Christ's declaration "It is finished" on the cross signified the complete fulfillment of all that was necessary for salvation, leaving nothing to be added by human effort or religious observance
- - The Judaizers who came to Antioch wrongly taught that circumcision and adherence to the law of Moses were necessary for salvation, prompting Paul and Barnabas to travel to Jerusalem to resolve the dispute
- - Paul's own credentials as a former Pharisee and strict law-keeper gave him unique authority to argue that the law could not save, since he had kept it blamelessly yet counted it all as loss compared to knowing Christ
- - Peter's testimony about Cornelius's household established that God had already demonstrated his acceptance of Gentiles by giving them the Holy Spirit apart from any observance of the law
- - Peter's question about why anyone would place a yoke on Gentile believers that even Jewish believers themselves could not bear is central to the argument against works-based salvation
- - Peter made the striking point that Jewish believers are saved in the same manner as Gentiles, by grace through faith, not the other way around
- - James, as head of the Jerusalem church, spoke with Spirit-led wisdom, citing Amos 9:11-12 to demonstrate that the inclusion of Gentiles in God's redemptive plan was always foretold in Scripture
- - James's instruction that Gentile believers abstain from certain practices was not a salvation requirement but a call for sensitivity toward Jewish believers who came from a kosher and temple-worship background
- - James's observation that the law of Moses had been preached in synagogues every Sabbath for 1,500 years, yet no one was born again by it until Jesus came, served as a powerful unspoken argument that the law alone cannot save
- - Jesus's words in the Sermon on the Mount clarified that he came not to abolish the law but to fulfill it, and that the law's spiritual depth convicts every person of sin at the level of the heart, not merely outward action
- - Romans 3 confirms that all have sinned, that no flesh is justified by the deeds of the law, and that justification comes freely by God's grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus



- - The law remains valuable not as a means of salvation but as a revealer of sin and a pointer to Christ, and believers are encouraged to study it in order to understand the heart and nature of God
- - Old Testament believers were also saved by faith, looking forward to the Messiah, just as New Testament believers look back to him
- - The doctrine of grace should be the defining characteristic of the local church, and believers are called to defend it gracefully and with sensitivity rather than with division or hostility

Scripture Reference:

- - Acts 15:1-21 (primary text, the Jerusalem Conference)
- - Ephesians 2:8-9 (salvation by grace through faith, not of works)
- - Philippians 3:2-11 (Paul's credentials under the law and his counting them as loss for Christ)
- - Acts 11:2-18 (Peter's earlier defense of his visit to Cornelius's household)
- - Amos 9:11-12 (quoted by James, foretelling the inclusion of Gentiles)
- - Matthew 5:17-28 (Jesus fulfilling the law and spiritualizing its demands)
- - Romans 3:19-31 (justification by faith apart from the deeds of the law)
- - John 19:30 (Christ's declaration "It is finished")
- - Psalm 14:3 and Psalm 53:3 (there is none righteous, no not one)
- - Luke 16 (Abraham's bosom as the holding place for Old Testament believers)
- - Genesis 3:15 (the first promise of a Savior)
- - 1 Corinthians 12:8 (the gift of a word of wisdom)

Stories:

- - Peter's vision of the sheet lowered from heaven containing unclean animals, and his subsequent visit to the household of Cornelius where Gentiles received the Holy Spirit, is recounted from Acts 11 as foundational evidence that God had already accepted Gentiles apart from the law
- - The healing of the crippled man at Lystra in Acts 14 is referenced as one of the miracles God performed through Paul and Barnabas to confirm the gospel of grace among the Gentiles
- - The account of the Jerusalem Conference itself in Acts 15 serves as the central narrative, depicting how apostles and elders engaged in respectful discussion and reached a Spirit-led conclusion about the basis of salvation
- - The parable of the rich man and Lazarus from Luke 16 is briefly referenced to illustrate the concept of Abraham's bosom as the place where Old Testament believers awaited the completed work of Christ
- - Abraham's faith in believing God's promise of a son and countless descendants is cited as the Old Testament model of salvation by faith rather than by works



Scripture

Directly Cited:

- - John 19:30
- - Isaiah 7:14
- - Ephesians 2:8-9
- - Acts 15:1-2
- - Acts 15:3-5
- - Acts 15:6-7
- - Acts 15:10-11
- - Acts 15:13-15
- - Acts 15:20-21
- - Acts 11:2-14
- - Philippians 3:2-11
- - Amos 9:11-12
- - 1 Corinthians 12:8
- - Matthew 5:17-20
- - Matthew 5:21-22
- - Matthew 5:27-28
- - Matthew 11:28-30
- - Romans 3:10
- - Romans 3:19-31
- - Psalm 14:3
- - Psalm 53:3
- - Genesis 3:15
- - Luke 16 (Abraham's bosom)

Alluded To:

- - Acts 14 (miracles at Lystra)
- - Ephesians 4:8 (took captivity captive)
- - Romans 1 (homosexuality as sin)
- - Genesis 15:6 (Abraham believed God, accounted as righteousness)
- - Romans 4:3 (Abraham believed God)
- - Galatians 3:6 (Abraham believed God)
- - 1 John 4:19 (we love because he first loved us)



Quotes

To gracefully defend God's grace gracefully is the graceful thing to do. In the church of man, there is no grace. In the church of God, the church of the Lord Jesus Christ, grace is all there is.

In other words, when we boil it down to our understanding, all the work necessary for salvation of all mankind was complete. There's nothing you can add to it, but there's also nothing you can take from it.

It is up to Jews to follow the Gentiles' lead into being saved by the grace of Christ alone. Not the other way around.

Why do you test God by putting a yoke on the neck of the disciples which neither our fathers nor we were able to bear?

Even though we all know that and have experienced it for ourselves, none of us were ever saved or born again by it. until Jesus came. In other words, everything is different now.

we're not saying set aside the law of God, we're saying get saved. and then study the law of God while indwelt with the Holy Spirit who wrote the law of God.

For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, being justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.

The Bible says it is by grace you are saved. It's not about what you do. It's about what Christ has already done for you.

When God looks at you, he sees you in Christ, in Christ alone.

You would be justified, just as if you had never sinned. That's why the two-word phrase, in Christ, is so important.





Discussion Questions

The sermon describes salvation as a completed work, referencing Jesus's declaration in John 19:30 that 'it is finished' -- in what ways might believers today still subtly act as though something needs to be added to Christ's finished work in order to secure or maintain their salvation?

Peter's statement in Acts 15:11 suggests that Jewish believers must be saved in the same manner as Gentiles, essentially flipping the expected cultural hierarchy -- how does this challenge the tendency to attach cultural or religious prerequisites to the gospel message in our own time?

The sermon draws a distinction between being saved by grace and then studying the law versus trying to keep the law in order to be saved -- how does the indwelling of the Holy Spirit change the way a believer relates to and understands God's law?

Paul's self-description in Philippians 3 shows that he counted his most impressive religious credentials as loss compared to knowing Christ -- what credentials, moral achievements, or religious practices might people today be tempted to count as contributing to their standing before God?

The Jerusalem Council in Acts 15 modeled a process of graceful, Spirit-led dialogue rather than division -- what does this model suggest about how churches today should handle serious theological disagreements without fracturing the body?

James's observation in Acts 15:21 that Moses had been preached every Sabbath for generations yet no one was born again by it carries a powerful unspoken point -- what does this reveal about the difference between religious familiarity and genuine saving faith?

The sermon explains that Old Testament believers were saved by looking forward to Messiah in faith, just as New Testament believers look back to him -- how does this continuity of faith across both testaments deepen your understanding of the unchanging nature of God's plan of salvation?

Jesus's teaching in Matthew 5 internalizes the law, showing that sin originates in the heart before it is ever expressed outwardly -- how does this understanding of the law's spiritual depth both convict us of our need for a savior and guard against a merely external or performative Christianity?

The sermon notes that Gentile believers were asked to show sensitivity to Jewish believers in areas like food practices, even though those practices were not required for salvation -- what does this suggest about the relationship between Christian liberty and sacrificial love within a diverse congregation?

The closing prayer invites listeners to recognize that God sees believers as righteous 'in Christ' rather than on the basis of their own record -- how does the reality of being seen by God through the righteousness of Christ reshape the way you approach both your failures and your spiritual growth?





Small Group Guide

Acts 15: Gracefully Defending God's Grace

Based on the Jerusalem Conference Sermon

How to Use This Guide

This guide is designed to help your group move from hearing the Word to living it. Work through the sections at a pace that fits your group, prioritizing honest conversation over covering every question.

Key Takeaways

- 1. Salvation is by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone.** Paul's declaration in Ephesians 2:8-9 is not a theological footnote — it is the foundation of the entire Christian life. Nothing can be added to the finished work of Christ.
 - 2. Defending grace requires graciousness.** Paul, Barnabas, Peter, and James did not treat the Jerusalem Conference as a battle to be won. They treated it as a matter to be resolved, with sensitivity, patience, and the Word of God as their authority.
 - 3. The law reveals our need; grace meets it.** The law was never designed to save anyone. Its purpose is to show every person — Jew or Gentile — that they cannot save themselves, and therefore must look to Christ.
 - 4. Liberty and sensitivity must coexist in the church.** Gentile believers were not required to adopt Jewish practices for salvation, but they were encouraged to be sensitive to their Jewish brothers and sisters. Freedom in Christ does not mean indifference to others.
 - 5. The Holy Spirit speaks through God's Word and through God's people at the right moment.** James waited, listened, and spoke with wisdom that was clearly Spirit-led. The timing and content of his words brought resolution where argument alone could not.
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Opening Discussion

Begin your time together with one or both of these lighter questions to help the group warm up before moving into deeper content.

- *When you were growing up, what did you understand about how a person gets to heaven? Where did that understanding come from?*



- Have you ever been in a disagreement — at church, at work, or at home — where the way the conversation was handled made all the difference in the outcome? What made it go well or poorly?
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Discussion Questions

Section 1: The Problem at Antioch

Read Acts 15:1-5

The Judaizers insisted that Gentile believers must be circumcised and keep the law of Moses in order to be saved. Paul and Barnabas responded with "no small dissension and dispute."

1. Why was this issue serious enough to require a trip to Jerusalem rather than simply being dismissed? What does that tell us about how the early church handled doctrinal conflict?
 2. The sermon pointed out that these Judaizers were not opposed to Gentiles being saved — they were opposed to how Gentiles could be saved. Why is that distinction important? How does it change how we think about people who hold works-based views of salvation?
 3. Have you ever encountered a version of works-based salvation — whether in a church, a family background, or a cultural setting? How did it affect your understanding of the gospel?
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Section 2: Peter's Testimony

Read Acts 15:6-11

Peter reminded the council of what God had done at Cornelius' house roughly ten years earlier, and then made a striking statement: that Jewish believers are saved by grace in the same manner as the Gentiles — not the other way around.

1. Peter asked in verse 10, "Why do you test God by putting a yoke on the neck of the disciples which neither our fathers nor we were able to bear?" What does this question reveal about the nature of law-keeping as a basis for salvation?
2. The sermon noted that ten years had passed since the events at Cornelius' house, and that the church had drifted back into thinking Gentiles must first become Jews to be saved. What does that drift tell us about how easily the church can lose sight of grace, even after witnessing God's work firsthand?
3. Peter's statement essentially said that Jews must follow the Gentiles' lead into grace — not the other way around. Why would that have been a stunning thing to say in that room? Why might it still be a challenging idea today?



Section 3: James and the Word of God

Read Acts 15:12-21

James listened to the full discussion before speaking. When he did, he grounded his conclusion in the words of the prophet Amos, and closed with a quietly powerful observation about Moses being read in the synagogues every Sabbath for generations — without producing salvation.

- 1. James waited until the room was silent before he spoke. What can we learn from his timing about the role of patience and listening in resolving disagreement within the church?*
- 2. James quoted Amos 9:11-12 to establish that the inclusion of the Gentiles was not a surprise but had always been part of God's plan. Why is it important that church doctrine be rooted in Scripture rather than in personal experience or cultural expectations alone?*
- 3. The sermon described James' closing statement in verse 21 as a "coup de grace" — his unspoken point being that the law had been preached in the synagogues every Sabbath for 1,500 years, and no one was saved by it. In your own words, what is the proper role of God's law in the life of a believer?*
- 4. James instructed Gentile believers to be sensitive to their Jewish brothers and sisters in certain practices — not as a requirement for salvation, but as an act of consideration. What does that kind of mutual sensitivity look like in a church today?*

Section 4: The Law, Grace, and Romans 3

Read Romans 3:19-31

The sermon closed with Paul's summary statement in Romans 3 — that the law stops every mouth, that no one can be justified by keeping it, and that righteousness comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe.

- 1. Paul writes in Romans 3:23 that all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. Jesus made the same point in Matthew 5 by showing that murder and adultery begin in the heart before they are ever committed outwardly. How does this understanding of sin change the way you think about your own need for grace?*
 - 2. Romans 3:31 says that faith does not void the law — it establishes it. What do you think that means practically for how a believer should relate to the commands and teachings of Scripture?*
 - 3. The sermon made the point that studying the law of God while indwelt by the Holy Spirit is how we come to understand the heart of God — that everything in the law and the prophets points to Jesus. How has studying the Old Testament shaped or deepened your understanding of who Christ is?*
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Practical Applications

These are personal and group challenges to carry the sermon's content into daily life.

1. Examine your own foundation. Take time this week to honestly ask yourself: Is my assurance of salvation resting on what Christ has done, or on what I am doing? If you find any works-based thinking in your foundation, bring it before the Lord in prayer and return to Ephesians 2:8-9.

2. Practice graceful disagreement. Think of a doctrinal or practical disagreement you are currently in — or one you anticipate. Before your next conversation on the subject, ask yourself: Am I approaching this to win, or to resolve? Am I willing to listen as long as it takes before I speak?

3. Be sensitive to where others have come from. Someone in your life may come from a religious background built on rules, sacraments, or performance. Rather than dismissing that background, consider how you might speak grace into it with patience and care, the way Peter and James did in Acts 15.

4. Let the law do its proper work. The next time you read a command in Scripture that you know you have not kept perfectly, resist the urge to either excuse it or despair over it. Instead, let it drive you back to the grace of Christ and the freedom of the gospel.

5. Memorize Ephesians 2:8-9. The sermon described these as verses worth memorizing. Make them part of your week. Meditate on what each phrase means — grace, faith, gift, works, boasting — and discuss what you discover with someone in your group.

Closing Prayer Focus

Close your group time in prayer, bringing these specific things before the Lord together:

- Gratitude for salvation by grace alone, received through faith alone, in Christ alone
- Humility and sensitivity toward believers who come from different backgrounds
- Wisdom for your church to handle doctrinal disagreement with grace and patience
- Anyone in your group or in your lives who is still trusting in works or religion for salvation

"For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast." — Ephesians 2:8-9



Daily Devotional

5-Day Bible Reading Plan and Devotional Guide

Grace Alone: A Journey Through Salvation by Faith

Day 1: The Finished Work Reading: John 19:30; Ephesians 2:8-9

Devotional: The Greek word *tetelestai*, spoken by Christ from the cross, carried the weight of a completed contract. Every obligation fulfilled. Every requirement satisfied. Nothing left undone. This is the foundation of Christian faith: salvation is not a project you manage but a gift you receive. The moment you begin adding conditions to grace, you are implying the work of Christ was insufficient. It was not. The cross was not a beginning point for your effort; it was the ending point of your debt. Rest today in the reality that what Christ accomplished on your behalf is complete, permanent, and entirely sufficient.

Day 2: The Burden of the Law Reading: Acts 15:1-11; Matthew 11:28-30

Devotional: Peter asked a piercing question at the Jerusalem Council: why place on others a burden that no one has ever successfully carried? The law of Moses, faithfully taught in synagogues for fifteen centuries, produced moral instruction but never produced a single justified soul. It was never designed to save; it was designed to reveal the need for a Savior. When Christ speaks of an easy yoke and a light burden, he is contrasting the crushing weight of self-earned righteousness with the liberating reality of grace received. Whatever religious obligation you have been carrying as a condition of acceptance before God, lay it down today.

Day 3: Righteousness That Is Not Your Own Reading: Philippians 3:2-11; Romans 3:19-26

Devotional: Paul catalogued his religious credentials not to boast in them but to declare them worthless. Circumcised on the eighth day, a Hebrew of Hebrews, blameless under the law by outward measure -- and yet he counted all of it as rubbish compared to knowing Christ. The righteousness that saves is not the righteousness you build through discipline and religious observance. It is the righteousness of Christ credited to your account by faith. God does not look at your record when you are in Christ; he looks at his Son's. This truth should produce not passivity but profound gratitude and the freedom to love God without fear of rejection.

Day 4: No Distinction Reading: Acts 15:12-21; Amos 9:11-12; Romans 3:27-31

Devotional: James stood before the Jerusalem Council and drew from the ancient words of the prophet Amos to demonstrate that the inclusion of the Gentiles was never an afterthought in the plan of God. It was written centuries before Paul ever set foot in Galatia or Ephesus. God had always intended that all of mankind, without distinction of



background or heritage, would have access to salvation through faith. This should reshape how you see the people around you. No one is beyond the reach of grace. No background is too far gone. No history is too complicated. The same God who justifies the circumcised by faith justifies the uncircumcised through faith.

Day 5: The Law Points to Jesus Reading: Matthew 5:17-20; Romans 3:31; Luke 16:16

Devotional: Christ did not come to dismantle the law but to fulfill it in himself as the only one capable of doing so completely. The law remains a profound gift, not as a ladder to climb toward God's approval, but as a mirror that reveals your need and a signpost that points toward Christ. Every sacrifice in Leviticus whispers of substitution. Every feast in the calendar of Israel anticipates fulfillment. Every commandment exposes the gap between human effort and divine holiness. When you study the Old Testament with the Holy Spirit as your guide, you are not reading ancient history. You are reading the long, faithful story of God preparing the world to receive his Son.

Personal Reflection: Have you fully surrendered to the lordship of Jesus Christ, or are you still maintaining a portion of neutral ground?

Practical Application: Have a direct conversation with one person this week about what it means to be born again, using your own testimony as the starting point.

