

Salvation is by Grace through Faith Alone

Acts: The Spirit Moving / Acts 14:24-15:21 / January 18, 2026

Introduction:

As we pick back up in our study of Acts, we arrive at a significant transition in Luke's narrative. Over the next four weeks, we will cover a series of events that propel us forward in the Christian mission, beginning today with the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15. Let's remember what transpired before this and see why the council is called before unpacking it. Look at verses 24-26, "Then they passed through Pisidia and came to Pamphylia. And when they had spoken the word in Perga, they went down to Attalia, and from there they sailed to Antioch, where they had been commended to the grace of God for the work that they had fulfilled." These are the final steps in Paul and Barnabas' first missionary journey. After spreading the gospel through Cyprus, Antioch in Pisidia, Iconium, Lystra, and Derbe, they retraced their steps to strengthen believers in reach today, preach in Perga, and return to Syria Antioch. Notice what happens upon their return in Acts 14:27-15:2, "And when they arrived and gathered the church together, they declared all that God had done with them, and how he had opened a door of faith to the Gentiles. And they remained no little time with the disciples. But some men came down from Judea and were teaching the brothers, 'Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.' And after Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and debate with them, Paul and Barnabas and some of the others were appointed to go up to Jerusalem to the apostles and the elders about this question." Note the contrast established. They declared God's work, but a group of men were teaching something else. They declared God "had opened a door of faith," but men claimed more was needed for salvation. After much debate, the church sends people to Jerusalem for clarity because these men likely claimed authority from the Jerusalem church. Continue in verses 3-5, "So, being sent on their way by the church, they passed through both Phoenicia and Samaria, describing in detail the conversion of the Gentiles, and brought great joy to all the brothers. When they came to Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the church and the apostles and the elders, and they declared all that God had done with them. But some believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees rose up and said, 'It is necessary to circumcise them and to order them to keep the law of Moses.'" Note a second contrast. Luke recounts joy from Gentile conversions and them declaring God's work again, but some believers were insisting on circumcision, those, we are now told, who belonged to the party of the Pharisees. These repeated contrasts emphasize the problem. It wasn't a question of God's plan for Gentile salvation, but whether they had truly been saved. Was full conversion to Judaism necessary for salvation? With the repetition of "what God had done" and the joy of all the brothers, we see the concern is whether God's people would see, believe, and rejoice in salvation by grace through faith alone as the only way to enter God's new covenant community. These truths were disclosed in Acts 11 but now we will see how they were solidified and what they mean for God's people. First, these truths were solidified through,

Confirmation of God's Indiscriminate Grace

Carefully consider how the council engages in discussion. Look at verses 6-7, "The apostles and the elders were gathered together to consider this matter. And after there had been much debate, Peter stood up and said to them." Pause there. We don't see the whole church considering the matter, but the leadership. In verses 12 and 22 we will see the whole church was present, but the matter was strictly considered by the apostles and elders. As the first mention of elders, we discover the biblical pattern for leadership established by the apostles. Peter will even call himself a fellow elder in 1 Peter 5. Family, God has a clear design for church leadership, and it is not through democratic process. But that is another sermon and, while it's worth highlighting, I don't want to distract from Luke's main point. Continue in verses 7-9, "And after there had been much debate, Peter stood up and said to them, 'Brothers, you know that in the early days God made a choice among you, that by my mouth the Gentiles should hear the word of the gospel and believe. And God, who knows the heart, bore witness to them, by giving them the Holy Spirit just as he did to us, and he made no distinction between us and them, having cleansed their hearts by faith.'"

Peter begins by emphasizing God's powerful work through him at Cornelius' house, years before this. What does he emphasize? God giving the Spirit just as He did with the apostles, showing no distinction between Jews and Gentiles. Underline the phrases in verse 8 and 9, God "knows the heart" and "cleansed their hearts by faith." The focus on cleansed hearts and the Spirit is an allusion to Ezekiel 36:25-27, where God says, "I will cleanse you. And I will give you a new heart... And I will put my Spirit within you." These promises were written to the "house of Israel" but God's actions reveal they apply to Gentiles as well. Look at verses 10-11, "Now, therefore, why are you putting God to the test by placing a yoke on the neck of the disciples that neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear? But we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will." This drives Peter's point home. Circumcision and law keeping have no saving power, because none who had the law have been able to bear under its yoke. Rather, all are saved through the grace of Christ and, because God gave the Spirit indiscriminately of any law keeping, they are putting God to the test by requiring more. Notice what happens in verse 12, "And all the assembly fell silent, and they listened to Barnabas and Paul as they related what signs and wonders God had done through them among the Gentiles." Peter silenced all debate and they listened as God's power among the Gentiles was recounted. God's indiscriminate grace was confirmed through His clear actions. Second, these truths were solidified through,

Consistency with God's Prophetic Word

After Peter speaks for the apostles, an elder speaks. Look at verses 13-14, "After they finished speaking, James replied, "Brothers, listen to me. Simeon has related how God first visited the Gentiles, to take from them a people for his name." James is a significant voice. As Richard Longenecker points out, "Known as 'James the Just' because of his piety, he was... scrupulous in keeping the law." (Richard N. Longenecker, *The Expositor's Bible Commentary, Volume 9: John and Acts*, p. 446). Surely, James's commitment to the law would lead him to support circumcision, right? No. After referring to Peter by his Hebrew name, he uses a pointed phrase to show the depth of what God had done. Instead of using the common term for Gentiles, a term for "a people" is used that, to this point in Acts, has solely referred to Israel. Behind his words stands Zechariah 2:11, "And many nations shall join themselves to the Lord in that day, and shall be my people." Family, this language is significant for understanding what God has done. In Zechariah 2, the Lord doesn't say many nations would be joined to Israel. He said many nations would be "my people." James is saying the Gentiles are already God's people. Then, he confirms this with Scripture. Look at verses 15-18, "And with this the words of the prophets agree, just as it is written, 'After this I will return, and I will rebuild the tent of David that has fallen; I will rebuild its ruins, and I will restore it, that the remnant of mankind may seek the Lord, and all the Gentiles who are called by my name, says the Lord, who makes these things known from of old.'" Most of verses 16-18 are a quote from the Greek translation of Amos 9:11-12, but the mention of prophets (plural) agreeing show James has many prophecies in mind. Prophecies like Hosea 3:4-5 and Jeremiah 12:15-16, Isaiah 45:20-23 and Zechariah 8:22, along with Amos, consistently show God promised that when he rebuilt the house of David, when He established His Messianic King, the remnant of all who are "called by His name" would seek Him together. And this, James says, is proclaimed by the "one who makes things known from old." What he is essentially saying is, "Only God knows how it all fits together in His design. See the work of His Spirit apart from the law as sufficient proof that salvation comes by grace alone and don't oppose it." Family, this passage solidifies that salvation is by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone, and that God's indiscriminate grace is making a people from every nation, tongue and tribe. Bury this teaching deep into your heart to not be led astray. This brings me to what this means for God's people, that,

God's Saving Work Produces Cleansed Hearts

We need to carefully consider what James' conclusion means and doesn't mean. Look at verses 19-21, "Therefore my judgment is that we should not trouble those of the Gentiles who turn to God, but should write to them to abstain from the things polluted by idols, and from sexual immorality, and from what has been strangled, and from blood. For from ancient generations Moses has had in every city those who proclaim him, for he is read every Sabbath in the synagogues." Note the main conclusion. They should not trouble Gentiles who turn to God. In light of council's discussion, he means don't add any burden for salvation. What about verse 20? These encouragements seem like burdens. Some link these to food and moral commands in Genesis 9 and Leviticus 17-18, suggesting they are still binding on believers today. I am not persuaded that is James' intention. For one, it would be strange to maintain some food restrictions and remove others from Leviticus 17-18. Further, there is no mention of things being strangled in these passages. Finally, these four commands aren't found together in any later writing to suggest they were recognized as binding commands. So, what is going on? There are two strong options. First, James is encouraging practical ways for Gentiles to seek harmony with Jews. The inclusion of verse 21 would mean the exhortation is, "because Jewish believers have grown up under the law, and it continues to be read in synagogues, willingly accept these laws because they are the most difficult for their conscience and harmful to fellowship." If this is the point, he is showing how God's cleansing work includes a sacrificial love for others. This is possible, but I am not persuaded this is what James means. The second option is to see the connection of these things with idol worship in pagan temples, making them a call flee all idolatrous practices. If this is his point, verse 21 refers to the primary purpose of the law, particularly the ten commandments, of ensuring God's people had no other gods before Him. Here is why I am persuaded this is James' point. Notice the first charge is to, "abstain from the things polluted to idols." The Greek word for "and" that follows could signify a series of separate items or progression of linked items. I believe it is a progression for several reasons. First, Malachi 1:7 speaks of polluted sacrificial foods and verse 29 says "abstain from what has been sacrificed to idols." Second, the term for sexual immorality has a direct link to prostitution, and pagan temple worship had a common practice of "sacred prostitution." Third, there is historical evidence of strangling sacrifices and tasting the blood in pagan temples. Finally, there are strong connections to writings delivered to God's people outside of Scripture. The intertestamental book of 2 Maccabees mentions prostitution and unfit sacrifices as defilements by Gentiles in the Jerusalem temple. And the Didache, a practical instruction document for the early church, mentions not partaking of food sacrificed to idols. While these don't hold biblical authority, I am persuaded they, along with the other evidence show James is referring to practices in idol worship. As commentators point out, Jews believed the primary source of Gentile impurity was "the defilement of idols," so a call to turn from any association with idol worship would make sense (G. Alon, Jews, pp. 146-89). Listen to how Paul speaks of what was seen from the faith in Thessalonica, "how [they] turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God." Study for yourself. Even if this isn't referring to idol worship, the point remains the same. God's saving work produces cleansed hearts that turn from idols, including the idol of self, to lives with a love for God that shows the gospel's transforming power. So, what can we take away from this passage? First,

1) Trust in God's Grace through Faith in Christ Alone

These scrupulous believers assumed access to God's promises were contingent on a full conversion to Judaism because that was what it took to be part of God's people. In this, they missed what God was doing through the gospel. Paul's only letter without an opening thanksgiving is Galatians, which opens this way instead, "I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting him who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel—not that there is another one, but there are some who trouble you and want to distort the gospel of Christ." The rest of Galatians combats the distortion that any part of Judaism was necessary to receive God's promises. Family, if Satan can't stop gospel witness from the outside, he will try to harm gospel efficacy from the inside. There is one gospel in which we stand.

Trust the pure gospel of grace and flee anything that distorts it. Look out for errors of miss-emphasis and cling to the sacrifice of Christ alone to be saved. Turn from trusting in anything you can do to find true freedom and hope. Second,

2) Live in Light of God's Saving Work

Ask God to expose every one of your idols, including the idol of self, and turn from them to live for Him. Jeremiah 2:12-13 transformed my understanding of sin, idolatry, and faith years ago. Look there with me. God says, "Be appalled, O heavens, at this; be shocked, be utterly desolate, declares the Lord, for my people have committed two evils: they have forsaken me, the fountain of living waters, and hewed out cisterns for themselves, broken cisterns that can hold no water." All of Israel's sin is summed up as two evils, forsaking God as the source of life and seeking satisfaction in other things. Think of this picture. God is here as a flowing fountain of water to sustain every thirst. Yet, His people dug out holes for massive pots to secure rainwater for their needs, but every cistern is cracked and water flows right through. Meanwhile, the fountain's right here. That's crazy, right? But don't we do the same thing? Family, the root of all sin, all disobedience, all struggle, is denying the fountain in pursuit of the cistern. So, here is what I do. I call things I seek satisfaction in what they are, broken cisterns. Then I turn to the fountain. This will help with sacrificing to maintain harmony as well. When you realize everything else is a broken cistern, you will be ready and willing to give up whatever is needed to gain and glorify Christ. Trust in the pure gospel. Be satisfied by its blessings. And live in light of God's saving work.

Conclusion:

As the worship team comes for our time of reflection and response, I want to share the purpose of our remaining time to press in together. It is important not only to hear God's Word, but to respond to it. So, we have an extended time of worship in song each week for reflection and response. And to help our hearts engage, we invite physical expressions of response. Each week, you are invited to come kneel before the Lord as a physical posture of humility. Or come receive prayer from our prayer team worshipping with lanyards on in the front rows. Another physical expression is to remember Christ's sufficient sacrifice by taking communion. We celebrate communion monthly as a whole church but also have tables available each week for you to take communion if you are led. One at the front, and the second near the Mezzanine in the back. All the bread is gluten free to serve those concerns. Also, as our desire grows to ensure financial giving is a joyful act of worship, we have offering baskets at those tables for an opportunity to physically give as a response of worship. Hear our heart, this is not to coerce giving. 2 Corinthians 9:7 says, "Each one must give as he has decided in his heart, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver." We encourage freedom to give as and how you would like, whether here, online, or by mail. This is merely an opportunity for a physical expression of worship as you give. Family, none of these things are requirements but aids to encourage our hearts to respond to God's Word each week. So, as we enter this time of reflection and response, ask the Spirit to guide you and come at any time as you are led. Would you pray with me as we seek God's grace together?