

Acts 15:1-35

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[0 : 00] Acts chapter 15 is where we are today. It's the centre of the book. We're kind of halfway.! But in many ways Acts 15 is the centre of our faith. Acts 15 addresses what is the core of Christianity.

It talks about an issue that if you take it out of Christianity, the whole movement kind of comes crumbling down. It's 15 years have passed since Acts chapter 2. 15 years ago the Holy Spirit came upon the church and we have seen in the book of Acts the gospel go out from Jerusalem and Judea and Samaria to the ends of the earth.

The last two chapters saw Paul and Barnabas spreading the gospel all over Asia Minor but the churches are still very young and very fragile. Any major disruption could cause the movement to spiral.

And this chapter involves key places, key people and a critical time. In terms of places you've got Jerusalem. It's like the religious epicentre of the world.

It's where all the core leaders are located. What happened in Jerusalem on a religious level had implications all over the world.

[1 : 23] All across the Middle East. All across Asia. It's a bit like Westminster. And so decisions that are made in Westminster, well the rest of the country we feel the force of them.

On the other side there's Antioch, another city. And Antioch is the kind of cultural, social, economic force of the time. It's a cosmopolitan crossroads.

And it was a key place for the gospel movement of those who weren't Jewish. It's a bit like kind of Hollywood really. The kind of cultural centre.

And Hollywood decides on something and that spreads all across the globe doesn't it? And Antioch was a bit like that. It was the kind of cultural centre of the world. Trends in Antioch affected all over the place.

And at the centre of this newfound faith you have Jerusalem with Jewish believers. You have Antioch with the non-Jewish believers. Paul and Barnabas are sent off on their missionary journey from the church in Antioch.

[2 : 30] And when they come back from their journey they land right where they started. But it wasn't just places that are important in Acts 15. And there are people.

Giants of the faith. Heavyweights like Paul and Barnabas. Like Peter and James. The big beasts of Christianity. And all of this leads up to one main issue.

There's lots of things you can look at in Acts 15. But I want to focus in on one issue. So there are four parts of the story. And they all begin with D. A demand. A debate.

A decision. A delivery. A demand. A debate. Delivery. A decision. And then delivery. So the first few verses of Acts 15. There are grey clouds and a storm is brewing.

It's got the potential to fracture the Christian movement. And it all revolves around a demand in verses 1 to 5. There are a few guys that come up from Jerusalem to Antioch.

[3 : 27] Where tons of Gentiles are being saved by the good news of Jesus Christ. But they don't come up with encouragement. They come up with a demand. And they basically say if you want to be in God's family.

Believing in Jesus is not enough. You've got to follow the laws of Moses. And you've got to be circumcised. The claim is that to follow Jesus is not enough.

But you have to adopt the Jewish customs to be a real Christian. And it threatens the very foundation of the Christian message. The gospel is good news.

We have great news for this city. And the good news is that Jesus has done all the work. Jesus has paid all the price. So that sinners like you and I can be saved from the penalty of sin.

And be brought back into a relationship with God. Into the family of God. Jesus has done it all. And the gospel is free. This morning you don't have to do anything to earn your right.

[4 : 36] Into the family of God. Paul and Barnabas have risked their lives spreading the good news. That people could have a relationship with God again. That there's a door that was opened for them.

Opened by the Lord Jesus. And there's nothing that you can do. And there is nothing more to be done. But this group come from Jerusalem. And they say well actually to enter into God's family. You've got to become Jewish. To be a real follower of God. You've got to become Jewish. Imagine you've got a friend who works for Legoland. Children have you been to Legoland?

You've been? Or have you been? So imagine you've got a friend who works for Legoland. And he comes to you and he says. Here are some tickets for your family. Go to Legoland on me. Probably want to throttle him.

But he says to the family. Go to Legoland on me. Free tickets for the entire family. You can go whenever you want. You kind of work hard to clear your schedule.

[5 : 40] You put it on the family diary. And so you can take all the family there. Everyone is super excited to spend a day at Legoland. You get everyone ready to go.

You pack your lunch. You queue up in the enormous queue. And the person at the gate says. Ah come on in. Welcome to Legoland. You're riding the rides.

You're enjoying the displays. You're loving the day. It's a wonderful time. And then somebody from Legoland. Who's employed by Legoland. Comes up to you and says to you. Can I see your tickets? You hand the free tickets over. And they say. They say. I'm really sorry. But you either have to leave now. Or you have to pay the full price. Can you imagine the confusion?

And the frustration. You say. No, no, no. Our friend. They gave us these free tickets. They work for Legoland too. And the person says. No, you either have to leave now. Or you need to pay the full price.

[6 : 40] For the whole family. And you're thinking. Who am I supposed to believe? Am I supposed to believe my friend. Who works for Legoland. Who gave me the free tickets. Or am I supposed to be. Believing this person.

You say. Is there no one else. I can talk to. Can I speak to a manager? Is there anyone higher up. That I can speak to? We've sacrificed a lot. To be here.

We've cleared our schedule. We're enjoying our time. It would be so confusing. Wouldn't it? Well the Gentile Christians. In Antioch. Were probably feeling that.

Times a million. It was deeply unsettling. For them. To hear. That they had to become. Jewish people. In order to be true Christians. Who do you believe?

Do you believe. Paul and Barnabas. Who told us the message. Or do you believe. These people. Who've come from HQ. Who are coming on the scene. Who seem to have authority.

[7 : 35] Who do you believe. Can you imagine. Being told. You have a free gift. And then afterwards. Being told. No. You've got to pay a steep price. Not just a financial one.

But one that would affect. The whole of your life. From now on. I'm sure there were loads of men. In this group. Desperately hoping. That the. The Jerusalem delegation.

Was wrong. The issue is so central. It couldn't be. Ignored. It couldn't be. Accommodated. And so. Paul and Barnabas. Quickly confront these guys. Because they're.

Out of line. With God's way. And God's message. The demand. Become. To become Jewish. Would fracture. The early church. But if Jerusalem.

And the leaders. Of the church. There in Jerusalem. Agreed. With the people. That had been sent. It would mean. There would have to be a break. There would have to be. A fracturing. There was no way.

[8 : 35] That these two things. Could go forward together. Either the gospel. Was a message. Of free. Unimaginable grace. Or it was.

That you had to become Jewish. People could not. Coexist. There's a lot on the line. And so. What would. The leaders. In Jerusalem. Where would they stand.

On this issue. The Pharisees. That is the religious authorities. Weren't just challenging. The doctrine. Of grace alone. But they're also challenging. Aren't they? The credibility. Of Paul and Barnabas.

And so the church. In Antioch. They get a convoy. Convoy together. They get a delegation. With Paul and Barnabas. And they send them. Up to Jerusalem. 200 miles away. They stop. At different places. On the way. And they share. About what God. Has been doing. Among the Gentiles. They are. They are pumped. About it. And once they arrive. In Jerusalem. They're received. Well by the church.

[9 : 32] There. And again. They share. What God has been doing. All over Asia Minor. So are the Pharisees.

Going to be right. Demanding. That all people. Become Jewish first. In order. To enter into the family. Of God. That's the demand. Here's the debate. The debate is in verses 6 to 11.

If you look there. The debate begins. People from different. Side starts speaking up. There's probably a good deal. Of energy in the room. And commotion. And Peter.

Takes the stage. Steps up to the mic. Peter reflects back. His experience. From a few years ago. When God showed him. That the Gentiles. Are to be included. In God's family.

Remember Cornelius. He said. The Gentile. Who asked Peter. To come down. And Peter. Comes and goes into his house. And he starts preaching. And as he preaches. The Holy Spirit.

[10 : 28] Descends. On this. Non-Jew. This Gentile. Cornelius. And all his family. Before they were ever circumcised. Before anything had happened. God gave them. The Holy Spirit.

Just as he'd given. The Holy Spirit. To the Jewish people. In Acts chapter 2. God had made. No distinction. On who he was going to. Pour his grace on.

Notice how Peter. Again and again. Shows that God. Is the initiator. Of his work. Verse 7. God chose. Peter.

To speak to the Gentiles. Verse 8. At the beginning. We see that God. Is the one. Who knows people's hearts. It is God. Who bears witness. To the Gentiles. It is God. Who gave the Gentiles. The Holy Spirit. It is God. Who made no distinction. Among them. It is God. Who cleansed their hearts. By faith. Over and over. Peter. Is emphasizing. And trying to hammer home.

[11 : 25] That it is God. Who initiates. God. Who chooses. God. Who pursues. God. Who rescues. God. Who bears witness to. God. Who provides. God. Who cleanses. The Gentiles.

And so. If anyone is going to oppose. The Gentiles. Coming into the family of God. They are not just opposing. Paul and Barnabas. They are opposing God himself.

And so. God. If God. Did not distinguish. Between Jew. And Gentile. How in the world. Why would we? Chop it off. Peter. Shows that.

He is a. He is a Jew. Is saved. In the same way. As the Gentile. Look at verse 11. we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will be.

There aren't two ways to God. There is only one way to God. And so this is the last we hear of Peter. Start of Luke's Gospel, he's just an ordinary fisherman.

[12 : 31] Until Jesus comes on the scene and encounters Peter, he invites him to be part of what he's doing. Jesus takes him along in his movement, this movement that changes the landscape of the world.

But when Jesus is arrested, Peter denies him. He's ashamed of being associated with Jesus. Quickly, Peter realises his error. He confesses he was wrong and he comes back. In the book of Acts, it is Peter who preaches at Pentecost.

It is through Peter that God brings thousands into his family. And then he uses Peter to spread the Gospel message. An ordinary fisherman used for global purposes in God's movement.

The debate's just getting started. Verse 12, Paul and Barnabas, they've just got back from their missionary journey, recounting how Gentiles are believing the Gospel and it's spreading like wildfire.

They talk about how people are being healed and they wrap up. And as they wrap up, one of the most influential men in the whole of the council in the Church of Jerusalem gets to his feet.

[13 : 37] It's James. He's the half-brother of Jesus. He's well respected. The way that James goes will largely affect how the council goes.

And so like this heavyweight champion, James comes with poise and carefulness. And James wants Jewish and Gentile Christians to be united.

He threads the delicate needle of including Gentiles without making the Jewish people feel excluded. He doesn't want to put an unnecessary burden on the Gentiles.

But at the same time, he doesn't want the Jewish Christians to feel alienated. Where Peter and Paul and Barnabas, they reflect what God has been doing in these last 12 years.

James takes another approach. He goes back 700 years. He quotes from the Old Testament and he says, there's going to be a time coming when there would be a great restoration for the world. This rebuilding time.

[14 : 36] And it wouldn't only be for Jewish people but for Gentiles too. God was going to gather a people from the nations. From all over the world. And so James tells the Gentiles, he tells the Jews in council that the Gentiles have always been part of God's plan.

The very scriptures that the Jewish people hold in high regard teaches them that the Gentiles don't have to become Jewish in order to be saved. They don't have to fulfill any ceremonial sacrificial laws.

But James knows this would be a hard pill to swallow for some of the Jewish people. They would have wondered, if this doesn't matter, does anything matter?

And so James winsomely weaves in a few thoughts to encourage the Gentile Christians to avoid this. Look what he says in verse 20. He says, but write to them to abstain from the things polluted by idols and from sexual immorality and from what has been strangled and from blood.

Why does James put these four things down? Are these things that the Gentile Christians have to do in order to be saved? No. Not at all.

[15 : 55] But James' vision is that the church of Jesus Christ would be a unified church across the world. It would be filled with Jewish people and Gentile people who have come to know the Lord Jesus Christ and they've come together to know him.

It's an issue for the Jewish people scattered. Where they are, they're a minority. And maintaining purity for the Jewish people was for them a matter of survival. and part of their identity. One of the bedrocks of the community was eating a meal together. There would have been no way would therefore Jewish Christians with very strict dietary requirements to sit and share a meal with Gentile Christians who don't follow the same.

It's a bit like having vegans in church life. And so I want to say to you if you're a vegan here you're very, very welcome.

But you've got to admit it's a pretty hard work having you for lunch. It's the type of thing that's happening here amongst the Gentile and the Jewish Christians.

[17 : 11] The Gentile Christians they're free to eat whatever they want. But the Jewish Christians by their conscience they're more restricted in their diet. James knows this. He knew they wouldn't be able to share a meal together. It shows us the importance of hospitality sitting around the table.

He wanted them to be able to come together in unity. So he says Gentile Christians if you can abstain from certain foods it'll make it much easier to be united with your Jewish brothers and sisters. You don't have to become Jewish to be saved.

That would be hypocrisy. But be mindful of your brothers and sisters who are Jewish. There are things that you might do that would be a huge stumbling block from them.

So abstain from certain foods from foods for idols. Respect them in their situation. Accommodate to their needs. And as it relates to sexual immorality pagan temples scattered all over the land.

Keep away from them. James says here the Apostle Paul says over and over again in his letters stay away from sexual immorality. That's not the way of God.

[18 : 19] He doesn't say this so that you can earn away to God. He's saying if you're a follower of the Lord Jesus you've got to let go of those pagan ways and follow God alone.

Peter, Paul, Barnabas and James have all come to the place in this debate firmly landing with Jesus. Showing that anyone can be saved by God's grace alone.

Number three the decision. Verse 22 to 29 the council decides to write a letter. The letter is from the entire church in Jerusalem the leaders and the apostles.

It is binding on other churches. They are of one accord. The letter begins by recognizing the tense situation in Antioch. They're unsettled.

There's a stir being created because of these people that have come up from Jerusalem demanding that they become Jewish. Paul and Barnabas would have been so grateful for this letter that said these guys didn't come from us.

[19 : 24] They do not speak with the authority of the church. Tells those in Antioch that Paul and Barnabas they are dear brothers who risked their lives for the gospel. The church in Jerusalem the

church council has decided that Paul and Barnabas were doing it the right way.

The letter continued that key representatives are being sent along with them with this critical decision based on the Holy Spirit's direction. And the voices on the council the decision of the council which was binding was that there would be no further requirement to be followed except believing in the Lord Jesus Christ.

Let me just say as an aside they didn't say did they and we're all independent churches alright you knock yourselves out in Antioch you decide what's best have a vote on it you decide that's not how it worked.

There is isn't there there is an authority here with the elders that is obviously the prototype of a presbytery where decisions are made which are binding on all the congregations and so this decision is made based on the Holy Spirit's direction there is no further requirement to enter into God's family except to believe in the Lord Jesus Christ.

You want to be in God's family this morning all you have to do is receive God's grace in Jesus Christ. You do not have to become Jewish there is no need for you to follow all the ceremonial laws but as James has already laid out there's a deep unity isn't there there's a deep oneness with our Jewish brothers and sisters in Christ and so abstain from sexual morality food offered to idols it's remarkably isn't it that the Jerusalem council came to a unified decision I think it's remarkable in our house somebody says what do you want to watch that decision takes ages there's all sorts of debate when the meal planner is not up to date and somebody says and what do you want to eat there's carnage debate goes on for ages but here there's a debate with great consequence one belief that is central for the great gospel movement and there's unity among the council the story concludes in

[21 : 47] Antioch and there's delivery fourth day verses 30 to 33 the leaders from the church in Jerusalem come up and they deliver this wonderful news a church that has been confused is now given clarity and encouraged that you and I can be restored to a relationship with the God who made us by believing in Jesus Christ alone and that is the good news of the gospel I can imagine that congregation was overjoyed I can imagine the men's group were absolutely delighted that they didn't have to get circumcised so Luke is establishing that the gospel which is moving throughout this region it's rooted in the promises of the Old Testament but you are not required to become Jewish belief in the Lord Jesus is the only requirement to be part of his family trust in the

Lord Jesus reliance on the Lord Jesus is the only requirement to be part of his family you don't have to fulfill a long list of requirements you don't have to cover a prerequisite course you don't have to clean yourself up this morning Jesus says come to me all you who are burdened and heavy laden and I will give you rest there is nothing that you can do to earn your way to God there is nothing that you have done that need keep you away from knowing God and being rescued from the penalty of your sin it is all accomplished through Jesus Christ Jesus Christ has done it all and so what do we learn four things about the gospel as we finish four things about the gospel number one the gospel which is the good news of the Lord Jesus is exclusive exclusive means isn't it the hello magazine the okay magazine are they still about no it would say exclusive it means you can only read it there you can't find it anyone else you can only read it there there's an exclusive offer that means the offer isn't available everywhere else here's the offer it's an exclusive the gospel is exclusive that means we can't do anything to earn our way to God and so the famous question is that God asks why should I let you into heaven and if your answer is well I've lived a good life I've tried my best I've treated other people well I'm a church goer it shows that you are basing your salvation on your own good works there is something in each of us isn't there that wants to earn our way to God but Jesus Christ has done it all it is our issue isn't it with Roman Catholicism that we want to say that the Bible teaches it is faith in Jesus Christ alone by grace alone that is what saves you it is not going to mass it is not going to confession it is not doing penance there are many things that we stand with Roman Catholics on but on this central issue isn't it they've misunderstood the gospel tragically awfully horrifically!

the gospel is exclusive there is no partnership between you and God it is not faith in Jesus Christ plus your good works it is faith in Jesus Christ alone it's incredibly humbling isn't it?

there is no partnership that is initiated by Jesus it is fulfilled by him and it's offered to you and it's offered to me and salvation is found nowhere else other than in Jesus Christ alone and all we do is respond we come with open hands we come saying nothing in my hands I bring simply to your cross I cling the gospel is exclusive secondly the gospel is inclusive it's exclusive but it's also

inclusive isn't that the wonder of Acts 15 it's for all people it is for Jew and for Gentile it is for Iranian and Iraqi it is for the Brits and the Europeans it is for all cultures all peoples all ages it is for vegans it is for vegetarians all sorts of weirdos the gospel is open the gospel is inclusive you might feel very very inadequate you might feel you're from the wrong side of the tracks you've got nothing going the gospel of the Lord

[27 : 05] Jesus Christ is for you it is exclusive it is inclusive number three the gospel is dividing because it's exclusive which means there is only one way to God and there is only one mediator between God and man it is good news that people have to respond to it is not fake news that you can discard it is not irrelevant news it is not random news some refute it some reject it some ignore it but wonderfully some believe it and the dividing line is those who put their trust in the Lord Jesus Christ alone and those who don't and the implications for what you do with this news could not be greater the gospel alone is the dividing line and the way that we respond to this gospel message is what determines whether we're in God's family or not that if we will believe in him we are in and if we will not believe in him we are out the gospel is exclusive the gospel is inclusive the gospel is dividing and lastly the gospel is unifying that if you are a follower of the Lord

Jesus you share a bond of unity with another follower of the Lord Jesus in a way that cannot compare to anything else you may like the same sports team you may like the same interest you might be from the same part of town you might have the same occupation as someone but if you fly to Turkmenistan and you meet with a follower of the Lord Jesus who you've never met before you have a deeper bond with that believer because your identity is in Christ and he is the source of our salvation and your hope in life and in death is shared with that brother or sister our identity in Christ together gives us a deeper unity than anything else that can be found in the world and we see the Jerusalem council speaking in that way don't we verse 23 we see them address people who are strangers in Antioch as brothers and because the gospel is unifying we are brought into the family we're given a common mission we're brought into the family and we're given this task of bearing with one another of making sacrifices for one another of giving up our preferences for one another to use our freedom wisely for the good of our brothers and sisters and so this entire gospel movement hinges doesn't it on this one belief of how one is saved of how one enters into the kingdom of God how one enters into the family and Acts 15 teaches us that it is by faith alone in Christ alone by grace alone there's one requirement this morning there is one thing there is one way to God to have faith alone in Jesus Christ alone by his grace alone let's pray