The Right Answer to a Crucial Question
Acts 15:1-35

So we're back in the book of Acts, chapter 15. And it's crunch time for the early church. You see, we've called this series 'Turning the World Upside Down' because that's what the early church did. But today we are going to see them face a critical decision. Get this decision wrong, and there would be no turning the world upside down. Get it right… and the rest is history.

Acts 15:1-35

One Crucial Question
Now, up until now, if you were Jewish the world was pretty simple. You were either Jewish or you weren't, and if you weren't you were a Gentile.

But then Jesus came. And after his resurrection he told the disciples to spread the good news of his death and resurrection to the ends of the earth. And they began to do just that. And this council meeting took place around 49AD, so it's been about 10 years since Gentiles started hearing and responding to the gospel and becoming Christians, beginning with Cornelius the Roman Centurion. And more recently, which is what triggers this debate, there has been this incredible activity up in the city of Antioch, were loads of Gentiles are becoming Christians. And then the church at Antioch had sent out Paul and Barnabas on the first mission trip to the Gentile world, and they'd seen multitudes of Gentiles responding to the gospel. So, by Acts 15, the mission to the Gentiles is full steam ahead.

Which was great, unless you were a Jewish Christian, coming from a more conservative background in Jerusalem. Because, whilst these Gentiles were becoming Christians, they weren't becoming Jews first. So, some of these conservative Jewish Christians make the trip up to Antioch, where Luke tells us that they start teaching, v1, 'Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.' And later on in v5 they say of the Gentile Christians, 'It is necessary to circumcise them and order them to keep the law of Moses.'

So, get the scene. Barnabas and Paul have recently come back from their mission trip, where they've been talking about Jesus' grace, and how he died and rose again to save us. And they've seen how God had opened a door of faith to the Gentiles, and how loads of them had responded. And now, they're back in Antioch and they've got people saying, in their own church, 'no, faith in Jesus is not enough, to be really saved these Gentiles have got to do something more.'

Now at this point Luke tells us in v2 that Barnabas and Paul, 'had no small dissension and debate with them.' And that makes Luke sound like an Englishman doesn't it, because this is what anyone else would call a blazing row. So why do the apostles go head to head with these visiting Jewish teachers? What's such a big deal?

Well, think about what the debate is over, because this question that they're driving at lies at the very heart of religion, even of life, your life and my life. And

the question is, 'how can you be saved? What do you have to do to be saved?' And everyone is getting hot under the collar about it.

Ok, but why is that such a big deal? Why not just dismiss this as an academic theological discussion, along the lines of 'how many angels can stand on the point of a pin?'

Because of what it means to be saved. Just think how we use the word. 'The rescuers managed to reach the crew of the sinking ship and saved them just in time.' Or, 'The evil baron had me in his grip, but my knight in shining armour saved me.' 'Or The German centre forward turned past the last defender and struck the ball towards the net, but the English goal keeper saved it.' Ok, unlikely, I know, but do you see, to be saved means that a worse outcome is possible, doesn't it?

But what does it mean for you and me to be saved? Well, in the months prior to this council meeting in Jerusalem, the apostle Paul wrote his letter to the churches in Galatia, tackling the exact same problem as the one these teachers raise. And there he doesn't use the word 'saved', instead he uses the word 'justified': how can you and I, with all our past and all our present sins, all the times we do and think and say what we shouldn't, and don't do what we should, how can we, guilty though we are, stand before a holy and good, and just God, and have him declare us 'not guilty'? How can we be declared righteous, and be welcomed by him as his friends, and be a member of his people, when there are all these reasons why we should be condemned instead?

And that's the question isn't it? How can we be saved? How can people like us be declared righteous, when we are so far from righteous? How can we be rescued from the consequences of being sent away from God's presence, with the words 'guilty' wringing in our ears?

And this matters, doesn't it? You see, if you're about to sink under the waves, you want someone to throw you a life belt that will save you, not one that will sink with you. If you're being rescued from a rock face, you want to know that rope being offered you can take your weight, not snap as soon as you grasp it.

So if the question 'how can you be saved?' is crucial, then getting the answer right is vital.

The Answer We All Need

Now, these preachers who have pitched up are not exactly your usual trouble makers, are they? These guys are good people. They are deeply religious. They are highly moral, and they take their faith seriously. They're the kind of people who would make great Swiss neighbours. They'd never make a noise after 10, and they'd never dream of parking in your parking spot. Which just goes to show that you can be all those things – good and moral and religious and still be wrong on the most fundamental of questions.

You see, they were arguing that for a Gentile to be truly saved, for God to accept them, and welcome them into his people, they had to be circumcised, and on top

of that, they had to obey the law of Moses. Now, so many centuries later you might think 'the answer's obvious isn't it? Of course you don't need to be circumcised.' But just think about it. Circumcision was the sign of God's covenant with his chosen people. It was the sign that you were a member of his people. And because Abraham was the one God first gave this sign to, circumcision linked you back to the promises that God made to Abraham, including the one that all nations, the Gentiles, you and I, would be blessed through him. And then, after circumcision, came the law of Moses: which said 'this is what you must do to be right with God, you've got to do this and this and this and this.'

And so these guys are saying, look, we know what God thinks already: to be a member of his people you've got to be circumcised; to be right before him, you've got to do all the right things. In other words, if you want to be saved, you've got to be circumcised, you've got to obey the law.

So, they have a point don't they? I mean, if you and I are going to stand before God don't we have to make the standard, and do enough right things to be counted righteous? And besides, isn't there something empowering about being given a 'to do' list, especially for people like you and me, who like the challenge of obtaining a goal, and being the one who does it? 'Me, Martin Slack, I've done it, I've kept the law, I've saved myself.' And won't setting a certain moral standard for salvation help preserve morality, and keep society working right? So isn't there something appealing about this kind of thinking?

Well, Barnabas and Paul clearly didn't think so. All along their message has been about Jesus' grace, and that we're saved, not by what we do, but by what Jesus has done for us. And so they head south to debate this out with the elders and apostles at the church in Jerusalem: is what Jesus has done at the cross and in his resurrection, and putting your trust in him enough to save you, or do you have to save yourself by obeying the Law of Moses?

And Luke tells us in v7 that when the council met there was 'much debate'. Interesting that isn't it? So this wasn't a decision that was handed down from on high by a charismatic leader figure, who could bully and cajole people to do what he wanted by the sheer strength of his personality. These guys sat down together and reasoned it out – it is a wonderful example of a plurality of leaders working it out. And Luke gives us the three stand-out contributions.

The first one's from Peter. And he reminds them how taking the good news to the gentiles began: v7, '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.' In other words, 'boys, let's remember that it was God who started all this. It was him who set up that meeting with Cornelius the Roman centurion. So if anyone's to blame for this… it's God! He's the one behind it all! And not only that, but how were those first gentiles saved? By hearing the gospel, what God had done for them in Jesus, and believing it!' And then Peter says that God showed he had accepted them, v8, 'giving them the Holy Spirit just as he did to us.' In other words, Peter says, v9, *God* 'made no distinction between us and

them,' *God* made no distinction between Jew and Gentile, but 'cleansed their hearts by faith.'

And that's how you get a clean heart, Peter is saying, that's how your guilty conscience is cleansed, that's how you're saved. Not by constantly trying to do what's right and hoping you've done enough to please God; but by faith, by trusting, and knowing, that Jesus has done enough for you.

Which is why Peter questions why anyone would place the crushing weight of the Law on anyone's back. Verse 10, '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.' You see, Peter knows, and he knows everyone in the room knows, that whilst the Law of Moses tells you 'this is the standard you have to reach to be acceptable to God', none of us can do it. And the Jewish people had had centuries of experience of failing to make the grade. And they all knew that crushing sense of guilt and unworthiness, as the Law makes it clear – hey, you know you've got a problem, don't you. God is up here, and you are down here, and no matter how hard you try, you can't bridge this gap. You can never be good enough. You can never do enough. You can never save yourself. In other words, the law tells you just how much you need God to be gracious to you. Which is why Peter wraps up his argument by saying, v11, 'but we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will.' Guys, we know, even us Jews, that we cannot save ourselves, that we can only be saved by God's grace in Jesus. And if that's the only thing that can save us, it sure as anything is the only thing that can save the Gentiles.

And Luke tells us in v12 that 'all the assembly fell silent.' Just picture that scene, as everyone in the room looks at his own heart. Because when you realise your own need for God's grace, when you realise that you don't make the grade, it kind of kills the argument that others have to make it, doesn't it?

Then Barnabas and Paul stood up, and, v12, 'related what signs and wonders God had done through them among the Gentiles.' That God had put his seal of approval on their mission and their message.

But then the final person to speak is James. And everyone would be looking to James. Firstly, he was the leader of the church in Jerusalem. Secondly, this James was Jesus' brother, and most younger brothers do not think that their older brother is the Messiah, the Son of God, and everyone should believe in him to be saved. Or at least my younger brother doesn't. But thirdly, James was recognised, even by those outside the church, as being incredibly godly, and extremely conscientious in obeying the law of Moses. So if anyone is going to say, 'no Jesus, is not enough, they've got to keep the law, they've got to become good Jews', it's James.

But look what he does. He starts off by referring back to what Peter had said and says something fascinating, v14: 'Simeon [uses his Jewish name] has related how God first visited the Gentiles, to take from them a people for his name.' Now, in the Old Testament, when ever you get 'the Gentiles', or 'the Nations' side by side

with ‘a people’: the ‘people’ always refers to God’s people, the people of Israel. And so James is saying, look God is doing something incredible in our day: he is going to the nations, the gentiles, and from them he is taking a people. So, by believing the gospel, by trusting in Jesus, through the grace of God, Gentiles are being included in God’s one people of faith, Israel.

Not only that, but he says, v15 that ‘with this the words of the prophets agree’. And note that he says the prophets, plural, so it’s more than one text. He’s thinking of the amazing chapter 4 in Micah we’re going to look at in home groups this week, he’s thinking of passages in Isaiah, that say this is what would happen. But the passage he quotes is from Amos chapter 9, that God would come and ‘rebuild the tent of David’ (v16)– that he would come and restore Israel, so that, v17, ‘the remnant of mankind may seek the Lord, and all the Gentiles who are called by my name.’ In other words, James is saying, ‘Look, in Jesus, God has rebuilt the tent and the ruins of David, He is the supreme king of the Jews, in the line of David, and the Gentiles are being brought in to his people, and there is no mention and no need for them to obey the Law.’

And so with that, this Jerusalem council agrees. You can’t save yourself by hoping to obey the law. Instead salvation comes by believing and trusting in the grace of Jesus, and God had foretold it all through the prophets.

But. But then, at James’ suggestion, they add these 4 things that the Gentiles should do: v20, they should ‘abstain from the things polluted by idols, and from sexual immorality, and from [meat] that has been strangled, and from blood.’ Well, hang on a minute. They’ve just decided that salvation is by grace, through faith, but now it seems like they’re saying, ‘sure you aren’t saved by observing the law, but here are some laws to keep anyway.’ But why, if everyone has been concerned not to trouble the Gentile believers with the Law, do the Gentile churches that receive the letter with this decision respond to it the way they do: v31, ‘And when they had read it, they rejoiced because of its encouragement.’

So how can *joy* flow out of a message that says: you are saved by Jesus grace, but we also want you to avoid doing the following.

The Joy that Follows

So the Gentile Christians, people like you and me, clearly did not see these four requirements: no blood, no strangled animal meat (that still has blood in it), nothing offered to idols, keep clear of sexual immorality, as a burden. Rather, they heard the message of grace, and took these requirements for living, and rejoiced. Why?

Was it just that they got away with out being circumcised, and the men are all sat there thinking, ‘well boys it could have been a whole lot worse, we should be grateful for small mercies’? No. There is something much deeper going on here.

You see, James explains his reasons for suggesting these 4 things to avoid: v21, ‘For from ancient generations Moses has had in every city those who proclaim him, for he is read every Sabbath in the synagogues.’ In other words, your Jewish

neighbours and your Jewish brothers and sisters in the church are steeped in the Law. And whilst neither you, nor they, are saved by the law, we want you to go on enjoying fellowship together. We want you to go on being able to eat together and meet together. And that may require you to lay down some of your freedoms to do that.

And these gentile Christians rejoice at being able and at being asked to do that. Why? Because they know that Jesus laid down his freedom for them, so they are happy to do it for others. So it is precisely because they all know that they are saved by grace, it is precisely because of the unity they have in the gospel of Jesus, that they are prepared to lay down their own freedoms and preserve the unity of the church. You see when you know grace, and receive God's grace for yourself, you have grace to show to your brothers and sisters who are different from you. If you're a law keeper – you always think others aren't making the grade, and that robs you of joy, and makes them miserable. But when you experience grace and extend grace, it brings joy to you and to others.

But they also rejoice precisely because it is *salvation by grace*. Because when you think it's down to you and you've got to work and try and impress God, but you've got this crushing yoke of the law on you, and you know you can't do it, you despair. As one of the guys said in the student bible study this week, if you think you're saved by keeping the law, you're doubly stuffed: because you're miserable in this life and you're not even saved in the next. But when you realise it's by grace through faith, and the load rolls off, and you realise God accepts you, in Christ, sinful though you are, then there's joy.