

# Resolved to Live – As a Witness for Jesus

“...about all that Jesus began to do and teach” (Acts 1:1).

## R<sub>2</sub>L – Resolved to Live: The Crisis That Almost Crippled the Church

Acts 15:1-21 (Part 3)

Acts 15:13-21

13 After they had stopped speaking, James answered, saying, "Brethren, listen to me. 14 Simeon has related how God first concerned Himself about taking from among the Gentiles a people for His name. 15 With this the words of the Prophets agree, just as it is written, 16 'AFTER THESE THINGS I will return, AND I WILL REBUILD THE TABERNACLE OF DAVID WHICH HAS FALLEN, AND I WILL REBUILD ITS RUINS, AND I WILL RESTORE IT, 17 SO THAT THE REST OF MANKIND MAY SEEK THE LORD, AND ALL THE GENTILES WHO ARE CALLED BY MY NAME,' 18 SAYS THE LORD, WHO MAKES THESE THINGS KNOWN FROM LONG AGO. 19 Therefore it is my judgment that we do not trouble those who are turning to God from among the Gentiles, 20 but that we write to them that they abstain from things contaminated by idols and from fornication and from what is strangled and from blood. 21 "For Moses from ancient generations has in every city those who preach him, since he is read in the synagogues every Sabbath."

As we have been working our way through this text of Acts 15, we have noted that what was taking place here was crucial for the survival of the true church. What was examined, debated, and eventually decided by the delegates and leadership of the church determined whether or not Christianity would be essentially a branch of Judaism along with the keeping of all its laws; or whether Christianity actually offered something different, something unique, something that represented good news and hope to all who would embrace it, be they Jews or Gentiles, slave or free, men or women.

You may think that I have been beating a dead horse, so to speak, in impressing upon you the clear and essential message that Luke, the human author, along with the Holy Spirit, the Divine Inspirer, intended to communicate. And what is that message? What is the message that rang true around 49 AD and must still be the message of the church today? By now you ought to know it; that salvation; the hope of eternal life is found by faith alone in the Person and work of Christ alone and all of this has come to us by God's grace alone.

As we have come to see, faith alone, that is a *trust and confidence that what needed to be done to make a person right with God and made fit for heaven has been done through the life and death of Christ and that this work was confirmed and approved by God the Father when He raised His Son Jesus from the dead (see Romans 1:3-4)*. Faith, according to the Scriptures, is not a "work" of man. It is not something we contribute to our salvation; rather faith is a divine gift, a God-granted bestowal to receive the all that accompanies salvation. Salvation is a package deal beloved. And while it goes a bit beyond what we need to cover in our text, let me share with you what is included in this gift that we call salvation. Theologians call it the "ordo solutis" which is Latin for "order of salvation." Theologically it is simply the order of the decrees of God through which a person is saved. In other words, while many things are happening simultaneously at salvation, biblically there is a logical order to the events. What does God do to bring about a person's salvation? Consider biblically:

1) **Election/predestination** – God the Father chooses those whom He saves (Ephesians 1:3-5);

# Resolved to Live – As a Witness for Jesus

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- 2) **Effectual calling** – God the Father draws the sinner to Christ (Romans 8:30; 1 Corinthians 1:9; John 6:44);
- 3) **Regeneration** – God the Father makes us alive in Christ (John 3:3-8; Ephesians 2:4-5);
- 4) **Faith** – a God-granted confidence in the person and work of Christ (Philippians 1:29; Ephesians 2:8-9);
- 5) **Repentance** – a God-granted sorrow and turning from one’s sinfulness and selfishness in order to pursue the things of God (Acts 2:38; 2 Timothy 2:25);
- 6) **Justification** – to be declared righteous by God in conjunction with one’s “faith” in the person and work of Jesus on his behalf (Romans 3:28; 5:1);
- 7) **sanctification** – the process whereby God sets His people apart and His people then strive to be conform to the image of Christ (Romans 8:29, 1 Peter 1:2; 1 Thessalonians 4:3); and,
- 8) **Glorification** – that moment when we will be fully conformed to the image of Christ by the grace of God (Romans 8:30; 1 John 3:2).

That, my friends is the “order of salvation” – the package deal; that which has come about as a person believes on the Lord. It is wonderful and mysterious. It is truly a God-thing and it is what the Scriptures teach. But what I would have you notice most about this list it is not about what man does to secure or obtain this gift of salvation, but rather the emphasis is upon what God has done to save people. There is no becoming Jewish, keeping the law, attending the right church, or even of making ourselves fit. As Jonah prayed while in the belly of the great fish, **“Salvation is from the Lord!”** (2:9). The great bible teacher Louis Berkhof explained it this way.

*The ordo salutis describes the process by which the work of salvation, wrought in Christ, is subjectively realized in the hearts and lives of sinners. It aims at describing in their logical order, and also in their interrelations, the various movements of the Holy Spirit in the application of the work of redemption. The emphasis is not on what man does in appropriating the grace of God, but on what God does in applying it.*

I share all of this for two reasons. First, I love theology and I just got to walk you through one of the most glorious teachings of the Bible concerning salvation. But second, and more to the point, this was the theology, the doctrine, the teaching that was being expressed in seed form here in Acts 15. The question at hand, “How is a person saved?” Is a person saved by faith in Christ, plus his or her own contributions to prepare for salvation or to add to salvation? In our text this revealed itself in those who believed that salvation was faith in Christ plus the keeping of the Old Testament laws of sacrifice and cleansing. These believe that to be a Christian, one must first, on their own accord and to gain approval of God, become Jewish. It is now different today when we hear such false teaching that say in order to be saved, one must first, of their own accord and to gain the approval of God, be baptized in order to be saved; or, they must of their

## Resolved to Live – As a Witness for Jesus

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own accord and to gain the approval of God, keep the Ten Commandments, which to them means meeting on Saturdays, on the Sabbath, rather than on Sunday.

Thus far in our study of Acts 15, we have seen that once Paul and Barnabas returned from the first missionary journey as recorded in Acts 13-14, their preaching of the gospel to the Gentiles a message of faith alone in Jesus Christ was met with opposition. Judaizers, those who believed Gentiles must first become Jewish and keep the law, went in behind Paul and Barnabas, calling the Gentiles to become Jewish. This set off a debate, as we noted in 15:2, a debate that found Paul and Barnabas arguing the legitimacy of salvation by faith alone by evidence of how God was attesting to it by signs and wonders. But this was not enough. The argument found its way to the Jerusalem church where after hearing the arguments, Peter, the pillar of the church, reminded all the Jewish believers of his own experience in seeing Gentiles saved by faith alone, not by faith plus becoming Jewish.

All of this brings us to yet another apology, another defense of the teaching of faith alone in Christ for salvation. Beginning in verse 13 and running through to verse 21, we see this defense or argument for faith alone given by a man named James. Now some of you may think this to be James, the brother of John, one of the sons of thunder and part of the inner circle of Jesus' disciples. But let me remind you that James, the brother of the apostle John, was put to death back in Acts 12:2, leaving us with the question, which James is this whom we see in Acts 15? And for a number of reasons that we cannot get into now, it seems best to see this James as the half-brother of our Lord Jesus Christ and the author of the New Testament letter that bears his name. And thus, while some religious traditions hold that the book of James does not teach salvation by faith alone in Christ alone but rather that he taught salvation is by faith plus works, those who hold such a view have a double-edged sword as a problem. The first problem is that the book of James does not teach faith plus works, but rather, upon careful study, it teaches that saving faith always reveals itself with good works. As one of the Puritans once said, "Faith alone saves, but not the faith that is alone." We demonstrate the reality of our faith by our good works. That is the first problem; the second problem is that James here in Acts 15 is defending the very premise of Paul, Barnabas and Peter, which is what? That people, Jews and Gentiles, are saved how? By faith alone in Christ.

As we come to verse 13 then we see the apology of James. And what is important to note here is that James, not Peter, was the chairman of this meeting. James did not think like Paul. While Paul was indeed Jewish, it has been said that James was the most Jewish of all the Jewish leaders. As you read the book of James, if you are not careful, you may think him to be a bit of a legalist. In just 108 verses, there are 54 commands; 54 imperatives to be followed. That is one for every two verses. And yet, as Jewish as James was, we find him building upon what Peter and Paul had just said. This is the man you want communicating right now. As a Jew, by both conviction and by having kept the law, he was what we might say as being "old school"; traditional and very conservative.

It is important to note that as he spoke, he was not really addressing Gentiles, as in fact there were probably not too many Gentiles present. It was the Jews that needed to be persuaded. And to that end we find James beginning his speech by appealing not to Paul's testimony, for he was the apostle to the Gentiles, but rather to Peter's. Let us look now at the apology of James in favor of salvation by faith in Christ alone. We will see James appealing to three sources.

# Resolved to Live – As a Witness for Jesus

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## I. James appealed to the testimony of Peter (15:13-14)

*13 After they had stopped speaking, James answered, saying, "Brethren, listen to me. 14 Simeon has related how God first concerned Himself about taking from among the Gentiles a people for His name.*

I find an important and interesting principle here; that there is nothing wrong with appealing to the testimony and experiences of men and women of faith. While we are to be Bible-centered and compare everything with Scripture; so long as there are people faithfully communicating the Word as well as faithfully living out the Word, it is safe to appeal to their testimony. This is why we quote from what we call “old dead guys” – the Puritans, great preachers and theologians of the past, and even from contemporary pastors who have proven themselves faithful to the Word of God. As we will see in a moment, while it is good and appropriate to appeal to the testimony of men, it is not enough; there is something better. But for now, we find James building on Peter’s testimony.

Was Peter perfect? Certainly not; the often rash, put-his-foot-in-his-mouth apostle at times deviated from the course; yet he always came back to center; always came back to Jesus. So we find James using Peter’s testimony as the basis of his own apology. But why Peter’s and not Paul’s?

Notice that as James captures the people’s attention, he refers to Peter as, “Simeon”. This is Peter’s Jewish name as James is seeking to convince a Jewish people. James is clear that in contrast to the arguments of the Jewish legalists who wanted to add something to faith in Jesus; who believed Gentiles must become Jewish before they became Christians; James affirms that God had indeed already been saving Gentiles apart from their keeping the law. In essence James was saying, "I agree with Simeon. This is not about Israel, and Judaism, and circumcision, friends. This is about God and what God has determined to do; to take to Himself a people from among the Gentiles; something that by all testimonies given had already begun."

But there was a bigger question looming than simply what did it appear that God was doing; that question being this; “Does the Scripture have anything to say about this?” We can be so easily taken in by people’s experience alone when we must see if what they are saying and doing lines up with Scripture. Scripture is our final authority and this is James’ second appeal...

## II. James appealed to the testimony of Scripture (15:15-18)

*15 With this the words of the Prophets agree, just as it is written, 16 'AFTER THESE THINGS I will return, AND I WILL REBUILD THE TABERNACLE OF DAVID WHICH HAS FALLEN, AND I WILL REBUILD ITS RUINS, AND I WILL RESTORE IT, 17 SO THAT THE REST OF MANKIND MAY SEEK THE LORD, AND ALL THE GENTILES WHO ARE CALLED BY MY NAME,' 18 SAYS THE LORD, WHO MAKES THESE THINGS KNOWN FROM LONG AGO.*

In these verses James was quoting from Amos 9:11-12, with some phrases that sound similar to Jeremiah 12:15 and Isaiah 45:21. Just in case there had been some kind of popularity contest brewing among the people as to who was right, Paul, the legalistic Pharisees, or Peter; James now does something that up to this point had not been recorded, the appeal to Scripture. “What says the Lord!” on this matter?

# Resolved to Live – As a Witness for Jesus

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By the way, one great way to keep a controversy from being personal is to lay personal opinions aside and look to the Scriptures! Amos wrote these words some 800 years before James would give this speech. And while there is more in all of this than we can cover this morning, let me share with you the very simple point James was making. He was saying that God had revealed to Israel some 800 years earlier His intention to reach and save Gentiles; and this is in fact what He has done. So James was questioning why the Jewish people would be surprised that the Gentiles are being saved.

Putting the Amos 9 passage into context, these verses speak of the coming millennial kingdom, the 1000 year reign of Christ on the earth. It is during this time that God will rebuild and restore Israel, as a nation. And how do we know that the Gentiles here are not just becoming Jewish, that the church is simply not the new Israel? Notice carefully that according to Amos, Gentiles are not being saved to be called Israel or Jews, but that they are being sought out and saved as what? As Gentiles who are called by God's name. If Gentiles had to become Jewish before being saved, then they would no longer be Gentiles and verse 17 would make no sense.

And so, by appealing to the Scriptures, James assures his Jewish audience that the inclusion of the Gentiles into the church did not change God's plan for Israel. At this time, Jews and Gentiles were being united together in the church, the body of Christ. At some point in the future, God will finish His plans, purposes and promises to Israel.

Salvation was to be by grace, through faith in the Person and work of Christ alone. Paul and Barnabas began this apology citing the message and the work of God among the Gentiles. Peter followed up by stressing that the Gentiles were being saved by grace alone through faith alone. And finally, James finishes with a bold exclamation point showing that the Scriptures teach Gentiles being saved as Gentiles because of the grace of God. This brings us to the final of our points this morning as...

### **III. James appealed to the testimony of his judgment (15:19-21)**

*19 Therefore it is my judgment that we do not trouble those who are turning to God from among the Gentiles, 20 but that we write to them that they abstain from things contaminated by idols and from fornication and from what is strangled and from blood. 21 "For Moses from ancient generations has in every city those who preach him, since he is read in the synagogues every Sabbath."*

James was saying in effect, "God has spoken on this matter. God said He would save Gentiles. Now we see Him beginning this process. Therefore, in my judgment (indicating that he had both the wisdom and the respect to be listened to), in my judgment, we must not oppose God or the Scriptures by making it difficult for the Gentiles to turn to God." There is such a simple wisdom here. It is two-fold.

First, James says in effect that we must not make salvation difficult. He said that we are not to trouble, or to make difficult, this turning to God, that is, "Let us not make salvation difficult." How can we make salvation difficult? Well, the Judaizers did it by adding circumcision. We can do it by adding other requirements, or by making people prove themselves to us, or by making the message too complex. Remember what Jesus said in the account of Mark 10:13-15...

# Resolved to Live – As a Witness for Jesus

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**13 And they were bringing children to Him so that He might touch them; but the disciples rebuked them. 14 But when Jesus saw this, He was indignant and said to them, “Permit the children to come to Me; do not hinder them; for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. 15 Truly I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child will not enter it at all.”**

What must I do to be saved? Believe, simply believe that Jesus came to save you; to die for your sins; to change your life to make it a reflection of Him. It is not that difficult. As witnesses, our task is to introduce people to Jesus. After that, it is the work of the Holy Spirit to regenerate dead hearts so people believe in Jesus. Yet we have a knack for complicating that which God intended to be simple. As one preacher put it, “The progress of the Gospel has often been hindered by people with closed minds who stand in front of open doors.” In 1786 William Carey, considered as the father of the modern missions movement and a firm Calvinist, shared before a ministerial meeting at Northampton, England his burden to reach the lost people of India. How did the ministerial respond? Perhaps the comment of a Dr. Ryland best summed it up when he said to him, “Young man, sit down! When God pleases to convert the heathen, He will do it without your aid or mine!” That, my friends is one way to make salvation difficult! How can people believe if they do not hear the gospel? And how will they hear the gospel if we do not share it with them?

So, we must not make salvation difficult, but James offers a second bit of wisdom in verses 20-21; that wisdom being this: *we must teach saved people to show deference to one another*. Some of us are not very familiar with the word “deference” which simply means respectful submission or yielding to the judgment, opinion, or will of another. It implies that there may well be two or more valid options, but that in order to show honor, you will allow the other person’s wishes or desires to become your own. This is the principle Paul refers to in Romans 12:10 when he wrote:

***Be devoted to one another in brotherly love; give preference to one another in honor;***

When James proposed that they send a letter to the Gentile Christians asking them to abstain from certain things, he was suggesting that these newly saved Gentiles be taught the principle of deference. He said in verse 20, ***but that we write to them that they abstain from things contaminated by idols and from fornication and from what is strangled and from blood.***

We will take this up in more detail next time, but basically James was saying that the Gentile Christians are to be encouraged to abstain from things that would affect the mission of the church; things that could hinder the church’s effectiveness. But let us be clear, James is not talking about *prerequisites* for salvation but rather the *evidences* of salvation. And what is one such evidence of salvation? It is when as a person is willing to think of others ahead of himself to the glory of God.

The wisdom of James is incredible. On the one hand he challenges the Jewish believers saying that they are to accept the Gentile brothers as equals, as those saved by grace through faith. But then he issues a challenge to the Gentile believers saying that they must do the same for the Jewish believers. The Gentile believers are seeking reach their unsaved, non-Jewish neighbors for Christ and Jewish believer must not put burdens on them that even we

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## Resolved to Live – As a Witness for Jesus

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could not keep as that will simply make salvation more difficult than it is supposed to be. On the flip side, as the Jewish believers are seeking to reach other unsaved Jews for Christ and see them become a part of the church, we do not need a congregation of people who appear to have no respect at all for God’s law and thus end the conversation before it begins. Therefore, James advocated that if the Gentile brothers would show deference to the Jews in these matters, it would help the mission of the church.

As we close, let me make one more application that comes to mind from this passage. The question we have been considering is this, “How is a person saved?” Is it by faith in Christ plus something else he or she does? Or is it by faith alone in Christ? We have seen the Scriptures testify that salvation is by faith alone. Now, all such talk is very personal; very “me” focused. And as we have seen in Acts 15, salvation is not simply personal; it is not simply about you as an individual. Yes, it starts there; but everywhere I look in the New Testament, we see that salvation is about a people. We are the people of God. We are the body of Christ. We are the church. James is desiring that both Jews and Gentiles manifest their love for the people of God, the church, by taking steps to prefer one another. That is what faith can do. That is what faith does. It believes the simple truths of Gospel. It believes that the gospel transforms the heart. It believes that it is called to honor God by showing preference and honor to those around. Are you saved by faith alone in Christ? How is your faith manifesting itself to these with whom you fellowship?

Let me close with a quote from one of those old dead guys; Mr. Charles Spurgeon, who wrote in a sermon: *With faith I can do all things; without faith I shall neither have the inclination nor the power to do anything in the service of God. If you would find the men who serve God the best, you will find them the men of the most faith. Little faith will save a man, but little faith cannot do great things.*

A lack of faith cripples a church; but great faith causes a church to fulfill her mission to the glory of God, of seeing people introduced to and to come to know Jesus as Lord and Savior. Let us be a people of great faith; faith alone in the power and person of Christ.

*Soli Deo Gloria*

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