



## Growing Pains

SERIES: *Acts: The Rest of the Story*

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A priest, a Pentecostal preacher and a rabbi would get together twice a week for coffee to talk shop. One day, someone made the comment that preaching to people isn't really all that hard. A real challenge would be to preach to a bear. One thing led to another and they decided to do an experiment. They would all go out into the woods, find a bear, preach to it, and attempt to convert it.

Seven days later, they're all together to discuss the experience. Father Flannery, who has his arm in a sling, is on crutches, and has various bandages on his body and limbs, goes first. "Well," he says, "I went into the woods to find me a bear. And when I found him I began to read to him from the Catechism. Well, that bear wanted nothing to do with me and began to slap me around. So I quickly grabbed my holy water, sprinkled him and he became as gentle a lamb. The bishop is coming out next week to give him his first communion and confirmation."

Reverend Billy Bob spoke next. He was in a wheelchair, with an arm and both legs in casts, and an IV drip. In his best fire and brimstone oratory he claimed, "WELL brothers, you KNOW that we don't sprinkle! I went out and I FOUND me a bear. And then I began to read to my bear from God's HOLY WORD! But that bear wanted nothing to do with me. So I took HOLD of him and we began to wrestle. We wrestled down one hill, UP another and DOWN another until we came to a creek. So I quick DUNKED him and BAPTIZED his hairy soul. And just like you said, he became as gentle as a lamb. We spent the rest of the day praising Jesus."

They both looked down at Rabbi Goldberg, who was lying in a hospital bed. He was in a body cast and traction with IV's and monitors running in and out of him. He was in bad shape. The rabbi looks up and says, "Looking back on it, circumcision probably wasn't the best way to start."

Well, what better way to start a message about circumcision! But did you know that circumcision was a huge issue in the early church? It was an issue that surfaced time and time again. And while this problem has long since passed away, the principle behind it is still strongly with many Christians today. The question is this, "Is salvation really a free gift from God in Jesus Christ, or do we have to earn it somehow?" James Boice says that, "The hardest of all ideas for human beings to grasp is the doctrine of salvation by grace alone. This is because we all always want to add something to it." In my ministry, I have found this to be so true. I've talked to countless people about salvation by grace alone and it doesn't make sense. It seems too easy. For some reason, we

are wired to believe that nothing is free. We feel much better when we work hard at something and earn it. There always seems to be a catch, even when it comes to salvation, right?

We are going to look today at Acts 15 and in this passage we will see that some folks wanted to add to the message of Jesus Christ. Paul and Barnabas come back to Antioch of Syria from their first missionary journey. They are tired from the trip, but extremely excited about God's work among the Gentiles. They were on a spiritual high. God was at work, he was using them, and people were coming to Christ by the thousands. Have you ever gone on a retreat or something similar and felt like you had an incredible experience with God only to come back to real life smacking you in the face? That is what happened to Paul and Barnabas. Let's begin with Acts 15:1-3 and look at the problem Paul and Barnabas face.

### I. The Problem (vv.1–3).

**"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.'"**

In Antioch, some men from Judea came and taught the Christians that Gentiles must be circumcised to be saved. These men were apparently devoted Christian Jews who were sincere but sincerely wrong. They came down from Judea—in other words, from Jerusalem. They apparently had some authority because they got an audience from the believers in Antioch. We'll find out later that these men said they were sent from James, the leader of the Jerusalem church. Their teaching created an uproar among these new baby Christians. Here's the thing—Jewish leaders had no problem with the general concept of believing Gentiles because the Old Testament taught this, right? The issue of debate is rather HOW these Gentiles will be saved, not IF they will be saved, but HOW. The problem is pretty clear— are Gentiles saved by faith PLUS circumcision, or by grace through faith in Jesus Christ? Think about it; this is a big deal. Are Gentiles saved by faith or by the law? Is the Good News truly for all people everywhere, or was this entire deal really just a reform movement in Judaism? Now, for us living in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the answer is obvious. We as Christians are saved by God's grace, through faith in Jesus Christ. Salvation is the free gift of God in Jesus Christ. We do not earn it and we do not deserve it. However, let's put ourselves in the minds of these first century Jews and young Christians for just a moment.

Circumcision was a sign of God's covenant relationship with his people. For centuries, Jewish boys were circumcised on the eighth day according to the Law of Moses (Genesis 17:12). Circumcision was a rite that had deep significance to the Jews. It set them apart from the pagan world. In fact, it was a command of God, one they did not want to break. The Jews were deeply committed to the Scriptures and to doing what God says. How can anyone hold that against them? Unfortunately the Hebrew people began to take great pride in this religious act. It became somewhat of a badge of their spiritual and religious superiority. Instead of reaching out and blessing other nations, as God wanted them to do, they became an exclusive religious organization. In fact, strict Jewish males would pray daily and thank God that he was neither a woman, a Samaritan, nor a Gentile. This "exclusive" attitude broke the heart of God.

Have you ever had this type of attitude towards others? Have you ever talked about your non-Christian friends, neighbors and family with this type of arrogance? With a type of pride that says, "At least I am not like them!"? I've done it. I've said things to others and to myself like, "Man, they are really messed up. Wow, their marriage is terrible. Whew, I am glad I do not have his problems! I am doing pretty good here, I'm a pastor for crying out loud and I go to church every Sunday!" Have you ever prided yourself and your relationship with God like that? We need to remember daily that we were once broken, empty and lost without Jesus Christ. We need to be on guard against religious pride. Let's continue by looking at how Paul and Barnabas respond in vv.2-3: **"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. 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."**

Luke tells us how Paul and Barnabas were outraged by what these men were teaching. In fact, they completely disagreed and debated them. The issue was huge for Paul and Barnabas because a lot was at stake. For one, the Gospel was at risk. These men from Judea were demanding that Gentiles be circumcised and arguing that there were conditions for salvation. They argue the Law must supplement the Gospel; Moses must complete what Jesus had begun. If this is true, and we are not saved by grace, then faith is not enough, Jesus is not enough, and we need to get to work and earn our way to heaven somehow. Paul and Barnabas knew this and ferociously went at it with these false teachers. What else is at stake here? Well, if it is necessary for the Gentiles to keep the Law of Moses to be saved, the Gentiles throughout the entire world, past, present and today, are not really saved. They are not Christians; you and I are something else. Christianity was and is a false religion. If fact, if we had to follow the Law of Moses precisely

and have faith in Jesus, we would merely be some type of sect of Judaism. With this understanding we can see why this was such a big issue for the early church. Some scholars even believe that Acts 15 is not only the most important chapter of the books of Acts, but also the most important chapter of the entire Bible.

After much debate, the church sends Paul and Barnabas to Jerusalem to settle this matter with the elders and apostles. Why did the church feel it necessary to send Paul and Barnabas to Jerusalem? We are talking about Paul here, not some rookie missionary who did not know the Scriptures. Paul undoubtedly knew the truth and knew that circumcision does not, and has not, saved anyone. Paul went to Jerusalem not because he was questioning the Gospel, but in order to defend it. The future of the church was hanging by a thin thread and both Paul and Barnabas knew this.

At the request of the church in Antioch, Paul and Barnabas set out for the journey to Jerusalem. Many scholars suggest that Paul actually wrote his letter to the Galatians on his way to Jerusalem. That makes perfect sense to me, because when you read the book of Galatians, Paul essentially says: we are saved by grace through faith and not through the law—period, end of argument. In fact it is in Galatians 2:11-16 where Paul refers to this meeting of elders and apostles over this issue of circumcision. Next, in verses 4-6 we see how Paul and Barnabas are greeted and what happens afterwards.

## II. The Meeting (vv.4-29).

**"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.' The apostles and the elders were gathered together to consider this matter" (vv.4-6).**

Paul and Barnabas arrive in Jerusalem and are warmly welcomed by the church, elders and apostles. They tell everyone of God's mighty work among Gentiles. I can just imagine Paul's excitement as he tells of the miracles and conversions he has seen in city after city. He tells them about how the Word has been spreading and about how God has used them to bring his light to a dark world. However, it wasn't long before a group of believers who belonged to the Pharisees stood up and said, "Okay Paul, nice stories, way to go, but it is necessary, it is required, it is fundamental that these new Christians not only get circumcised but also be ordered and commanded to keep the law of Moses!" The controversy breaks out again! But did you notice something here? These guys added yet another requirement to circumcision—keeping the Law of Moses. They add yet another stipulation to the Gospel!

Have you ever been in a meeting that was just so intense you wanted to sneak out? I know I've been in those kinds of meetings, and this was one of them. This issue of circumcision had enough backers and proponents that the apostles and elders met privately to debate the problem. The purpose of the meeting was to decide if Gentiles had to be circumcised to be saved. What would the outcome be? Who would stand their ground for the Gospel and for freedom in Christ? Who would fight against legalism? At this meeting four men would do just that: Peter, Paul, Barnabas and James. Peter responds first in vv.7-11:

**"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. 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.'"**

The text says that "after some time" Peter responds to the council. I found it interesting that here is loudmouth Peter, Mr. Act First and Think Second. The man who always wanted his opinion heard, now this same man sat quiet for probably hours before responding. I don't know about you, but I find that encouraging. Peter was a work in progress. God's grace has been at work in this man's life, and he has matured and grown in the Lord to the point where he doesn't always need to be heard first.

You and I are works in progress! There are areas in my life and in your life that I am sure we both want to change and wish weren't there. The promise of Scripture is that God has begun a good work in you and me, and he will complete that work. He is not through with us; he is growing us, maturing us, and changing us into the people he wants us to be. We are his "masterpiece" as Ephesians tells us, and any great work of art takes time to complete.

When Peter finally addresses the council, he tells them several things. He first reminds them that God's plan has always been for the Gentiles to hear the gospel and believe. He tells them of how God saved the Gentiles of Cornelius's household apart from circumcision (this story is recorded in Acts 10). Another point Peter makes is that God also gave the Holy Spirit to the Gentiles as he did to the Jewish Christians. God does not play favorites. Then Peter conveys to them how God made no distinction between the Gentiles and the Jews and has even cleansed their hearts by faith. God is at work in the hearts of the Gentiles, he says. It doesn't matter what type of purity laws they keep or what they do externally; God looks at the heart. He then rebukes the Jews by claiming that they are putting God to the test by asking Gentiles to be circumcised, when even they themselves could not bear the

yoke or the burden of circumcision. He says, "Guys, raise your hands if circumcision and obeying the law has really worked for any of you."

And finally, Peter tells the council how we are all saved. I love verse 11: **"But we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will."** Did any of you catch how Peter phrases his words here? What we expect Peter to say is this, "Hey, Gentiles will be saved just as we are saved." But he doesn't say that. He says, we Jews will be saved by grace through faith in Jesus Christ, the same way the Gentiles are being saved. In other words, he is telling his Jewish audience that the Gentiles are being saved and we (Jews) will be saved in the same way. Peter is careful to not present a "them-versus-us" mentality. He stays away from any talk of Israel being God's precious and chosen people. He makes it clear that God is creating a new people from all different backgrounds, walks of life, upbringing, ethnicities, cultures, hair color, body type, short, tall, fat, skinny, ugly and handsome, and even Raiders fans, and molding us all into a new community, a new nation, a new Israel. Grace and faith level the playing fields, they make fellowship possible, and they erase the racial lines and any other barrier lines. At CPC I think we get this. We understand that we who believe are saints who frequently sin, we are messed up and broken people saved by the irresistible grace of God in Jesus Christ. After Peter's response, Paul and Barnabas are given the floor 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."**

You expect Paul and Barnabas to stand up and go into a theological debate over the law and grace. But that is not what they do. They didn't have to, because both Peter and James do that. In some ways, the ministry of Paul was on the line here. He is the apostle to the Gentiles and it is his ministry that is being critiqued. So what do Paul and Barnabas do instead? They tell the council of the Gospel being spread to the Gentiles and the signs and wonders accompanying it. They tell the stories of precious people coming to faith in Jesus Christ. They, like Peter, talk about their experiences with and among Gentiles.

There is power in our stories, in our experiences with Jesus Christ. There is power when we can articulate to people how God got hold of our lives and changed us into the people they see today. For most, facts, figures, and logic don't hold any weight. People want to hear and they want to see in you if this Jesus thing works, if this Jesus person really is alive and well in you. Here at CPC, we frequently like to have our people share their faith stories with all of you. There is just something encouraging and meaningful when we hear of God's touch in the lives of people. It reminds us that God is in the business of changing

people's lives. What is your story? When is the last time you've shared it with someone?

The next person to address the council is James. Starting in verse 13 we read:

**"After they finished speaking, James replied, 'Brothers, listen to me. Simeon (PETER) has related how God first visited the Gentiles, to take from them a people for his name. 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.' 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.'"**

James, the brother of Jesus and the leader of the church in Jerusalem, affirms Peter's words and experience to the council and does what no one else has done yet—he quotes Scripture. As a side note, councils have no authority in the church unless it can be shown that their conclusions agree with Scripture. James chooses a very interesting book to quote from, and that is the book of Amos. Amos was one of the Minor Prophets, and the entire book is really a book of God's judgment and wrath towards his unfaithful people, Israel. The only encouraging words of the entire book are these three verses.

There are two truths found in these three verses. In verse 16, God promises to rebuild the tent of David. This is a prophecy about the resurrection of Jesus Christ, who was from the lineage of David. The second truth, the "remnant" Amos refers to is simply the Gentiles who will seek the Lord. By quoting Amos, James essentially reminds the council from the Scriptures that the Gentiles have always been a part of God's plan of salvation and are included in God's new community. He is saying that they shouldn't be surprised at what God is doing; in fact, they had better get on board and support his work or be judged harshly again. James' judgment is to not trouble the Gentiles who turn to God with the burden of circumcision. Instead, James gives them four things to abstain from, out of brotherly love for the Jews:

1. Things polluted by idols
2. Sexual immorality
3. Meat that has been strangled
4. Blood

Now at first glance you may think, despite the fact that those things sound totally gross, I thought the whole point of this council was to not burden the Gentiles with the Law of Moses and with weird requirements like circumcision. Why is James now telling them to do these things? There are two ways scholars interpret this. Some

argue that these four requirements are really moral issues. For example, "things polluted by idols" is really referring to idolatry and "strangled meat and blood" actually refers to murder. I guess that makes sense, but why didn't James just say that? On the other hand, the majority of scholars suggest that these four requirements were all matters of external purity—areas that new Christians were still dabbling in and Jewish Christians found utterly repulsive. These Jewish Christians were willing to give up circumcision as a means of salvation, but they were deeply offended by these external acts which by the way, were not related to salvation. Think about it. Say you are a Jewish Christian and a pagan friend of yours becomes a follower of Jesus. He invites you over for dinner, opens up the stove and places on the kitchen table a roasted pig! As a good Jew, you've never had a ham sandwich in your life! You would be so offended that you would get up and walk out. Fellowship would be broken and the harmony of the church would be hindered.

I think the underlying principle the council is making is this, we as Christians need to focus on love and unity toward our brothers and sisters in Christ. These four requirements are not related to salvation, and because of that he encourages new believers to abstain from them. He tells Gentiles to stay away from them for the sake of loving their Jewish brothers and sisters in Christ. James does not say that these are essential things to do; his tone is more suggestive in nature. In essence these four things are recommended, not commanded.

Let's move on and quickly look at the letter the council sent to the Gentiles in vv.22-29. Because the letter restates what we've already covered I am not going to read it all to you. Instead, let me highlight a few verses.

### III. The Letter (vv.22-29).

**"Then it seemed good to the apostles and the elders, with the whole church, to choose men from among them and send them to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas. They sent Judas called Barsabbas, and Silas, leading men among the brothers, with the following letter: 'The brothers, both the apostles and the elders, to the brothers who are of the Gentiles in Antioch and Syria and Cilicia, greetings. Since we have heard that some persons have gone out from us and troubled you with words, unsettling your minds, although we gave them no instructions, it has seemed good to us, having come to one accord, to choose men and send them to you with our beloved Barnabas and Paul, men who have risked their lives for the sake of our Lord Jesus Christ. We have therefore sent Judas and Silas, who themselves will tell you the same things by word of mouth. For it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to**

**lay on you no greater burden than these requirements: that you abstain from what has been sacrificed to idols, and from blood, and from what has been strangled, and from sexual immorality. If you keep yourselves from these, you will do well. Farewell.”**

The council decides that it is best to send a delegation to Antioch with a letter about their decision. Sending a delegation makes sense because a letter alone would be impersonal and cold. The elders and apostles love these new converts and want to be careful how they respond to this issue.

The letter makes several points. It is first from both the apostles and elders who are brothers to the brothers in Antioch, Syria and Cilicia (v.22). They address the letter to the brothers as brothers in Christ themselves (v.23). The leaders in Jerusalem want to make it clear that those men who have been teaching heresy were not sent on behalf of the church in Jerusalem. (v.24). Another point they wanted the Gentiles to know is that the elders and apostles came to one accord in the matter of circumcision (v.25). They all agreed—circumcision does not make anyone right with God. I found it interesting that there was no majority vote. The council met until they all could come to agreement about this matter. They searched the Scriptures for answers, they used their minds to listen and make their points, and the Holy Spirit confirmed their decision. The result was that all the elders and apostles agreed—in Christ, you are free from the law. The letter then explains four requirements that they asked Gentiles to keep in order to preserve the unity of the church and to protect their Jewish brothers from stumbling.

How do you make a big decision? Do you act on your gut instinct? Do you pray about it? Do you talk to your spouse? I think Acts 15 shows us a great way to make big decisions. The leaders met together to hear each other out, they found confirmation in the Scriptures, they came a unanimous decision, the decision seemed right to the Holy Spirit, and finally they wrote a letter and sent along representatives to represent their decision. Now, I am not saying that you need to do all these things when deciding to switch from Comcast digital cable to Direct TV. But it is wise to run major decisions through similar channels. What major decision is on your horizon? I encourage you to run that decision through the grid of Acts 15.

Finally, let's look at how the Gentiles responded to the letter in vv.30-35.

#### **IV. The Response (vv.30-35).**

**“So when they were sent off, they went down to Antioch, and having gathered the congregation together, they delivered the letter. And when they had read it, they rejoiced because of its encouragement. And Judas and Silas, who were themselves prophets, encouraged and strengthened the brothers with many words. And after they had spent some time, they were sent off**

**in peace by the brothers to those who had sent them....But Paul and Barnabas remained in Antioch, teaching and preaching the word of the Lord, with many others also.”**

In Antioch, the believers are gathered together and the letter is read to them all. Now, if you don't think there is humor in the Bible, here is a great example. Verse 31 says that there was great rejoicing in response to the letter because it was very encouraging. Oh, yeah, I'd say so. I bet all the men were giving each other high-fives and breathing a sigh of relief as they finally hear that they do not need to be circumcised! The church continued to press on and got over this major hurdle; however, this would not be the end of the problems in the early church. In fact, next week, Mark will look at yet another conflict between two church leaders.

As a side note, some of you may have noticed that verse 34 is omitted from your translation. You should know that scholars have debated whether verse 34 should be included in the chapter or not. They argue that most of the earliest manuscripts do not have verse 34 included while other manuscripts do. I am using the English Standard Version this morning because I don't think verse 34 was in the original manuscripts. In this translation, right after verse 33 there is a footnote. The footnote on the bottom says that some manuscripts insert verse 34: “But it seemed good to Silas to remain there.” Now, in the world of academia, this is really fun stuff to look into. But for our purposes today, to go into depth about verse 34 is beyond the scope of this sermon. Does that make sense? That being said, on November 11, we are hosting Daniel Wallace, a world-renowned Greek scholar and theologian. He is doing some amazing research with Bible manuscripts and he is going to come here and tell us all about it. It is absolutely fascinating. If you have friends who are skeptics and do not believe in the reliability of the Bible, this will be a GREAT Sunday to invite them so mark your calendars.

#### **CONCLUSION**

In Acts 15, the elders and apostles make it clear that Gentiles are saved by grace through faith in Jesus Christ—nothing more, nothing less. But the false teachers came along and wanted to add to the Gospel. They wanted to add to Jesus. They said that it is not enough to be saved by grace, it has to be grace and...Jesus and...the Gospel and...salvation and. When it comes down to it, Acts 15 is really about the church's fight against legalism. Is it what we do that saves us, or is it what has been done? Legalism always hinders the spread of the Gospel because legalism is a yoke no one can bare. Has legalism crept into your life somehow?

For me this has really been hitting home. There was a point in my Christian life where I

believed that if I didn't read five chapters of the Bible every day, I wasn't being a good Christian. Can you believe it? I remember going through the one-year Bible and if I missed a day or a week I would HAVE to make it up. I would spend hours playing catch up because I felt that it was my duty. The Word wasn't penetrating my soul; I was just trying to get it done. As I look back on my journey as a follower of Christ through the lens of Acts 15, I can see the places where legalism crept in, where I've added to the Gospel. This year I am going through the one-year Bible again, but I am on the "no guilt and no shame" plan. If I miss a day, or a week, I just start right at the day I should be on. It's fantastic, it is so freeing! That is the point I think the Jerusalem Council is making. We are free in Christ, but not free to do whatever we want. We are free to love God and love our brothers and sisters in Christ. But freedom for some reason can be a scary thing.

In one of my favorite films, *The Shawshank Redemption*, Ellis "Red" Redding has spent his prime wasting away in prison because of a reckless act of violence he committed as a teenager. After 40 years of incarceration, Red finally receives his release to enjoy the freedom for which he's longed. He gets out and finds a job as a grocery store bagger. However, he can't free himself from the habit of asking for permission each time he wishes to use the men's room. He's become "institutionalized." This newfound life scares him because he's grown accustomed to the structure behind bars. Imprisonment had become safe for Red. He didn't have to exercise his own decision-making. Someone else did the thinking for him, and now, on the outside, he faces a prospect more daunting and terrifying than incarceration: freedom. Red confesses in the movie that he contemplates various ways to break his parole and return to the security of his prison cell. He sums up his dilemma in one line: "It is a terrible thing to live in fear."

People caught up in legalism are no different than Red—scared to death of the freedom grace brings. It's much easier to retreat to our cells of dos and don'ts, of black and white categories. In Christ we are free from the Law and free from legalism. Religion is replaced by a relationship with Jesus Christ.

Red finally faces up to his fears and decides to travel to Mexico and find his friend Andy who escaped from prison. He almost didn't have the guts to do it. I love how the movie ends. It is Red walking on a white sand beach, with his shoes off, and surprising Andy who is sanding an old boat. For Red, freedom never tasted any sweeter.