

Acts 15. We're going to continue, this evening, in our study through the book of Acts. It is a report that the Lord gives us in narrative form for the first thirty years or so of the new church. And because it's written as a narrative, we can assume right away that this is what God wants us to know about the church, about its beginning, about what the Lord would want for the church today, what kind of people would He use, what kind of people did He use then. Where did their power come from? What kind of opposition did they face? And all of those things are presented to us so that we, as the church today, might know what God would want to do with us. And it'll give us a clear, I think, direction for what the church should be involved in.

It had been about fifteen years into the church's history by the time we get to this chapter. The gospel had gone out to the Jew first. The Lord had chosen a people through whom He could make Himself known. But His intention was always, certainly, to save all man through His Son. The problem was that that whole concept of the Gentile being saved was foreign to a group of religious people who had, over the years, isolated themselves first from God's plan for them to be the vessels through whom His good news would be preached but also they had practiced their religion in such a way that everyone else was left out. And so when God began to save Gentiles, when Peter was sent in a series of miraculous, I think, moves of God, to the house of Cornelius, he preached there to a house full of Gentile unbelievers who became believers on the spot when they heard the good news of Jesus. At the same time, because Stephen had been killed a few years earlier and people began to vacate town - the pressure was on the young church, there were men from Cyrene and from Cyprus who ended up going 300 miles north to Antioch in Syria, and they also began to share with Hellenists. Hellenists were Jews who were raised in Gentile cultures, and so they didn't look very much Jewish; they practiced Greek practices and Romans, and they also began to hear the gospel and had come to the Lord.

Additionally, and we finished a couple of weeks ago, the first missionary journey taken by Paul; Paul, who would be the pastor at this Antioch church in Syria, along with Barnabas, his helper, were sent by the church out to begin to take the gospel into basically Gentiles areas. They would go to the synagogues first when they

were there, but really the ministry, for the most part, was to Gentiles. And so they went into the Galatian area; they spent two years. We call it the first missionary journey of Paul. We went over it with you in detail. We're going to start the second one next week. So bring your maps, the ones we have given you, with you. If not, we will have some here for you. But this next journey of Paul will take him about 2700 miles and take about six years. But anyway, Paul had gone out and preached, and he had seen lots of Gentiles, obviously, come to the Lord. The problem was that God's idea of grace to save - though it was on the wall for all to see and read - was not so quickly accepted by Jews who had come to know the Lord because they'd always seen themselves very exclusive and Gentiles as being outside even the goodness of God, if you will, most of the time.

So by the time you get to Acts 15, this conflict has arisen between grace and works. Can you really just be saved by grace, or do you need to do something beyond what God has done to save you? It was a crisis. The Judaizers - those who were convinced, if you will, and in the Jewish mind that Christianity was a sect of Judaism that no one could ever be saved unless they first came to the Jewish faith, the faith in one God, monotheism. And so there were a lot of folks who believed in that; not only did they believe that, they taught that. And when Paul spent all of those years (those couple of years anyway) in Galatia establishing churches, these Judaizers (actually went after Paul was there) said they had come from Paul and sought to change the whole rules and bring Gentiles who had been saved under, now, this law and the circumcision and all of the things that were Jewish, if you will. And the conservatives in the church in Jerusalem, which was kind of the religious center, stood against grace without Jewish conversion for the most part. And so Paul and Barnabas - not only did they travel for a couple years - when they came back to Antioch and began to pastor the church again, these Judaizers came to town there, and they began to cause trouble and say, "It's all right to believe in Jesus and all and His bloodshed. But you also have to become a Jew and be circumcised and keep the Law and go to Temple." And they had all kinds of rules for them to follow, and salvation became a work, if you will, to them. The conflict between grace (Paul and Barnabas and Peter) and the Judaizers became difficult. They saw Paul and the guys as radicals. They tried to stop this wholesale Gentile evangelism. They tried to bring the Gentiles back to, like I said, becoming Jews. They even went the 300 miles and began to confront people there, and it got so bad that Paul finally said, "We're gonna to go Jerusalem and have it out with the leadership there about this entire issue." It was one of the biggest deals in the church early on, obviously.

And so, beginning in chapter 15 last week (the first twelve verses we looked at last week), they brought these false teachers and teachings before the church in Jerusalem (the apostles that were still residing there; James, the half-brother of Jesus, being pastor of that church, if you will), and they wanted to address it once and for all. As they traveled those 300 miles down the coast, verses 3, 4 and 5 of this chapter tell us that they began to tell all the churches that had been established in predominantly Gentile areas about what they had seen the Lord do. And there was great joy amongst the church because these Judaizers had been there too. False teachers usually don't bring joy; they bring sadness. And it was certainly that way for them. As a result, they finally arrived, if you will, in town. They met with the elders. There was just a big argument amongst them - sounds like they really couldn't resolve that at all. They took sides. There was an intense kind of debate, even amongst the leaders. Finally, in verse 7, Peter stood up, and with great forcefulness, he said, "Look, God called me, and here's how He led me to go to Cornelius'." It had been well laid out. We've studied it in detail. And he wanted to put in his two cents about the grace of God about what he had seen. We mentioned to you last week (Galatians 2) that Paul saw that when Peter came to Antioch, he was very wishy-washy about his commitment to grace. In fact, when these Judaizers from James' church came to Antioch, Peter got up and went to eat at the kosher table. He'd been enjoying hamburgers and stuff with everybody else, but he was pressured by this conflict. It stumbled Barnabas; it stumbled a lot of others. Paul called Peter out publicly, on the carpet, and said, "Look, if you're gonna walk by grace, then let's live by grace." And so even that confrontation had been specifically about grace versus works and what did you believe. And here Peter stands up, and he speaks very clearly. He's very bold. He's very assured of himself.

Certainly grace is one of the most important doctrines in Christianity. It is God's free gift based upon the finished work of Jesus at Calvary. It is a merit that you don't earn. It is a gift that you don't deserve. It is undeserved and unearned, if you will, but it is complete. And without God's grace, you cannot be saved; and with God's grace, you need to do nothing to be saved beyond believe in what God has told us He has done. So, when Paul writes to the Romans in chapter 5:1, for example, he says to them, "You have been justified by faith." The word "justified" means just as if I'd never sinned. God has justified you. "You have peace now with God through Jesus Christ our Lord by whom we have access by faith into this grace whereby we stand, and we can rejoice in the hope of the glory of God." This is where our stand is - it's grace. So it's an important issue that you can understand

and you can share with others, that you understand it for yourself. But understand this as well - it was a tremendously difficult time for Jewish believers. They had grown up with a concept of one direction. To kind of come to grips now with the idea of unmerited favor, in the framework of their life, they had always been taught works. I suspect most of you that came out of a religious background - not a Christian church, necessarily - were taught that as well; that it's all about what you do for God and how God is going to reward you. It's an unscriptural position. It was then, and it is now.

So Peter got up, and he laid it all out. And verse 12 ended with the words, "Then all the multitude kept silent." So there was an amazing kind of ministry that Peter had brought and testimony. And he told them that God hadn't distinguished between the Jews and the Gentiles when they got saved; they all got saved the same way. And God had been good. And so it left everyone kind of (even the opposition) speechless, if you will.

So we'd like to pick up in verse 12 tonight. We'll stop at verse 35 - it's one long narrative. And then we will begin next week with the ministry of Paul on the road again, starting in 50 A.D. and then running for the next six years, as he goes out to bear the gospel to the world.

But, anyway, we ended in verse 12 last week, "Then all the multitude kept silent and listened to Barnabas and Paul declaring how many miracles and wonders God had worked through them among the Gentiles." So, Peter finishes his testimony of how God had sent him to the Gentiles. He ends by saying, "How can you challenge God when God accepts them the way they are? I've seen it time and again." And it left everyone kind of quiet, which set the table for Paul and Barnabas who, in ministry sense, had much more exposure to God's grace (in that regard) with the Gentiles than everyone else. It does appear from verse 12, the way that it is written, that Barnabas spoke first. It says they "listened to Barnabas and Paul." Real typical Greek writing. But that would have been a wise move. They had great respect for Barnabas; they didn't necessarily have great respect for Paul. They saw him as a traitor in many ways, these fellas. So Barnabas would have been well received in the Jerusalem church. There's only one verse here. They listened to their testimony. We have no idea what they said. But we do have this - we have chapters 13 and 14 which are two chapters that reported all of their ministry in the first journey, if you will; and so no doubt they shared what we have studied and have looked at. The point was fairly simple, though. "We preach Jesus. God

approves the message. It falls on the hearts of the people. They get saved. And God confirms that the message we're preaching is His will because He enters in with miracles and signs and wonders just to confirm that by grace you can be saved through faith." When Paul wrote to the Galatians, which are all these churches that he went to in chapters 13 and 14, he wrote in chapter 3:5 of Galatians (to these churches), "He who supplies the Spirit to you and works miracles among you, did he do it by the works of the law, or by the hearing of faith?" And then he said, "Just as Abraham 'believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness,' know that you are only the children of Abraham when you have faith in God." And Paul wanted to drive that truth home. "Look, when God did great things among you, that was grace that God brought into your life." So that's where we ended last week - verse 12.

Verse 13, "And after they had become silent," (second time) "James" (the pastor, the senior pastor, the head of the church in Jerusalem) "answered, saying, 'Men and brethren, listen to me.' " Now, understand how difficult it was for these saints in Jerusalem to immediately grasp this concept. And maybe it's easier for you to realize when you realize that at some point you came out of the world, and you were met with the grace of God, and you wondered if it was true. Right? "Will God really cleanse me from all my sins? Will He not keep track of what I've done wrong? Will He not bring it up again?" And sometimes young Christians are amazed at that thought - that God would, in His grace, allow us to be like that. We've grown up with this idea of earning a place, of religious accomplishments, of rewards for obedience, of willpower, of performance. And yet now we stand by grace. That was their problem, too. And you might have thought that by now when they've heard it from Peter and from Paul and from Barnabas that the room would be shouting "Hallelujah!" But that wasn't the case. It was difficult to come to terms with that for them. If you were with us when we were taking that walk with Peter (through these chapters), we talked a lot about how Peter had to kind of be brought through all of the prejudices and foolish notions about who he was and what God had done to come to this place where he could just kind of rest in faith and in grace. Grace, as Pastor Chuck wrote a book, "Grace Changes Everything." And it certainly did for them. So, everyone's spoken in front of the leaders of the early church.

When James stands up, who is the half-brother to Jesus - by the way, James hadn't believed in Jesus until He had risen from the dead; he's a new guy on the scene, if you will, in terms of believing - he was the undisputed leader of the

church. Notice he says, in verse 19 (in a minute), " 'Therefore I judge.' " It was kind of like, "Here's my word. That's really all you're gonna get on it." And indeed he was in that kind of position. But understand that James was a legalist; not as far as salvation but as far as his view of grace early on. So, everybody now turns to James. Whatever James says matters. Right? He had been there from the beginning. I don't doubt that the Judaizers who were at this meeting had hopes that soared when he stood up to speak. And I don't doubt that Paul and Peter both swallowed hard. "Oh, man. Where's this gonna go now?" What would he say? He says, in verse 14, " 'Simon has declared how God at the first visited the Gentiles to take out of them a people for His name.' " I want you to notice - maybe you would miss it otherwise - he's very tactful with the Jewish sentiment. He calls Peter by his Hebrew name. "Let's just keep this on the Jewish terms." So he calls him Simon. The worry for the Judaizers, and you can go back and study it if you like, was that if the church could exist outside of Judaism, then what would happen with God's promises to fulfill Israel as a nation - to come to them, to rule from them? Those were real promises. But they weren't able yet to put together the rebuilding of the Temple, the time in Daniel, and they just couldn't put it together. "How can God deal with grace, and yet He's chosen a people?" James begins by saying to those that were gathered, "Simon." Now, he doesn't call him Peter. He calls him Simon. " 'Simon has told us how the Lord began to claim amongst the Gentiles a people for His name.' " " 'And with this,' " he says in verse 15, " 'the words of the prophets agree, just as it is written: "After this I will return and will rebuild the tabernacle of David, which has fallen down; I will rebuild its ruins, and I will set it up; so that the rest of mankind may seek the LORD, even all the Gentiles who are called by My name, says the LORD who does all these things." ' " So, James appears now to get it; like there's something that's clicking in his mind and in his heart. The Old Testament spoke about this age of grace - veiled terms for sure. But there was a time coming when God would again deal with Israel as a nation as He, through them, would deal in grace to all men. So, he calls them the church, and he says, here in verse 14, " 'God first visited the Gentiles to take out of them,' " to call out or to take out; and it's the word "*ekklesia*." The word "*ekklesia*" is the Greek word for church, and it literally means called-out ones. James was able to grasp (and this is, like I said, early on) that the work of God in the church would continue in the present day, that everybody could come to the Lord, Jew or Gentile; that we would be part of the Church Age but that the church would not interrupt or eliminate, if you will, God's future dealing with Israel as a nation (which was important to them). He will do His work in her and through her when the Church Age comes to an end, and that's certainly what the Bible would

bear the truth of. So, as he begins to speak, and you can tell he's been thinking about it - he's got verses, and he quotes here out of Amos 9 - and he applies the words, "After this time" to the Church Age. "After this time, God will turn." Now, if you've been with us - gone through the book of Revelation - there're very much breaks of time and work, but needless to say, when the Lord takes the church out of the world at the rapture, the last seven years of Great Tribulation and the dealing of God with man is going to be through the nation of Israel, nationally. Today it's an outreach to the lives and the hearts of the believers (by the Spirit of God) preaching and sharing their faith. But during the time of the Great Tribulation, the church is gone. The Holy Spirit is working in a completely different manner, if you will, and the witness is going to come through the nation itself. So, I think James was getting it.

He says, in verse 18, " 'Known to God from eternity are all His works.' " God knows what He's doing. The Church Age does not negate the promises of God. This seventieth week of Daniel (the prophetic one that they understood) is going to be a time when all of the nations of the earth would gather together to answer to the Lord. The point was, for James, "Look, this doesn't interrupt or negate what we have held onto for generations." So, the Gentiles don't need to become Jews. In fact, in the Lord's plans, He has planned Israel to be unique. The nation of God is not yet finished. You can read about it in Romans 11. But this is God's plan. I'm interested in, again, just reading it as a narrative, James refers to Simon; he doesn't refer to Paul and Barnabas at all. Peter had much more of a standing with this early church in Jerusalem than they did. So his decision is clear, and it's final.

And, "Here's my choice," verse 19. " 'Therefore I judge' " (because I know, now, the difference) " 'that we should not trouble those from among the Gentiles who are turning to God, but that we write to them to abstain from things polluted by idols, from sexual immorality, from things strangled, and from blood. For Moses has had throughout many generations those who preach him in every city, being read in the synagogues every Sabbath.' " So James' decision - really quickly, as he listens - is, "Look, Paul and the Gentiles are free to live in the grace of God." And through all of this discussion and debate, the Holy Spirit gets His point across, and it's a noble statement for James to make. Right? I think Paul appreciated the cost that this was going to cost this man, being the pastor in Jerusalem with a bunch of folks who are political and ecclesiastical, and I'm sure that they realized that James had to put himself out there to take this position. But it was biblical. I'm sure that they sighed a sigh of relief. There was an "Amen" under their

breath. I'm sure that the Judaizers just glared across the aisle. But God's at work. And James' word is this (in verse 19), "We should not trouble these Gentiles who are turning to the Lord." The word "trouble" there means to harass or to annoy or to stumble. These Gentiles, who had been seeking to walk in the grace of God, had run into Judaizers who had set before them things that would trip them up. And James literally said, "Knock that off right now. We're not gonna do this anymore. We're not gonna cause them to stumble. They're seeking the Lord, and the grace of God is sufficient." And so James makes the decision. But he also realizes that they're dealing with Jews, and especially the first generation's so difficult, Jews who were very sensitive to the freedoms that you found and the practices that you found in the lives of Gentile brethren. And I love the fact that that's what James calls them; that he calls them his brethren.

Now, what follows in verses 20 and 21 are not so much doctrinal statements as a request for graciousness from the leadership to the church. So he asks them this, "Be sensitive to the Jewish concept of life." Right? It's one thing to say, "I am free from the ceremonial law. The Lord has made me free. I can eat whatever I want." It's another thing to invite your Jewish brethren over for pork chops. Maybe he's not ready for that. Right? That might just stumble him. It doesn't mean there's no freedom for you. It just means that that freedom takes time to grow into, all the more so when you've been raised with one concept all of your life. To embrace the goodness of God, the freedom in Christ, can take some time. Grace also, on our part, requires self-sacrifice. What I do, I should do with you in mind and your walk with the Lord. James says, in verse 21, that Moses and the law had been preached constantly for many generations and would continue to be done. So he said to them, "Could you just meet them halfway?" You could summarize what he says here by saying - would you limit your liberty for the sake of the weak? Because you can either be a stumbling block or a stepping stone. Whatever freedoms that you find in Christ - and the Gentiles had plenty of them, especially when they weren't raised in these religious kinds of binding backgrounds - you can exercise your freedom in Christ with great sensitivity and love, or you can just flaunt it and, in the process, stumble a lot of people. So, this isn't such a doctrinal demand as it is a request from James, who deals with these people all the time, to exercise your liberty in a way that would honor the Lord. Peter will write (in his first epistle), "Be sure that you don't use your liberty as a cloak of vice. Use it as a bondslave," (1 Peter 2:16) someone who's attached themselves to serving the Lord.

So look at these requests. His first request is that you would "abstain from things polluted by idols." That's a food regulation. Much of the meat sold in the butcher shops in these days and in these cities had been purchased from temple worship places. These animals would be killed, they would be used in temple sacrifice. But no one wants to eat all this stuff, so they sell it off to the local butcher who sells it pennies on the dollar. Most people buy it because it's cheaper. It's certainly good, but there's a stigma attached to it; it's been offered to an idol. For Paul, he don't care. "Tastes like prime rib to me. And there's only one Lord, and that's the One I serve." But to those who were weak and had come from that background, and were certainly appalled at the issue of worshipping idols in that sense of the word, it greatly offended them. They hated idolatry, and just being a part of it would have offended them greatly. If you get a chance to go back and read 1 Corinthians 8 and 9, especially, it says that you should be careful about the way, that you should limit your Christian liberty and use as the standard the effect that your liberty has on people that are weak; and that the proper use of love and liberty is to make sure that you look out for them. So you should read 1 Corinthians 8, 9 and even chapter 10. We have to walk in our liberty in such a way that we don't stumble others - the growing, the less mature, those who feel like they have an obligation to the Lord. And whether that's music or whether that's the way you dress.....and may I just say to all of you Facebook people - I don't really mind if you want to have a drink. If you can drink before the Lord, that's fine. Be careful, though. There're a lot of people here in church here that are alcoholics, that God delivered, and they don't need to see you drinkin'. So here's what I would say to you - don't take a picture and put it on Facebook with you and a beer at a restaurant. It gripes me. I No, it gripes me. That's good enough. (Laughing) You've got to be more considerate for the people that you're sittin' with. Good for you that you're free. Good for you. Be careful. Because God is more interested in your brother's soul and his walk than your freedom. And the minute your freedom begins to stumble someone else, you've stepped over the line. So that's all that James is saying here. "Don't eat that meat." And Paul will say later on, "Hey, when you go to someone's house for dinner, if that bothers you, don't ask 'em where the food came from. Just eat it, and just pray for it. Don't go, 'Hey, did this come from Zeus' temple? I hear they're havin' a sale.' Don't say anything. Just eat and go, 'Ohhh, BBQ sauce please,' and then thank the Lord and get out of the house." Perfectly sensible. 1 Corinthians 6. You might read that chapter as well. So the Gentiles would have had very little problems with where the meat came from. They were free in Christ; they got saved. The Jews, because of their idolatry issues and things they learned, that would stumble them greatly.

So be careful what you appear yourself to be to others. I love listening to rock and roll - loud - in my car. Unless you come up to the car. Then I'm turning on KWVE. (Laughing) Because I don't want you to be upset that the pastor likes ZZ Top or something. (Laughing) You gotta work out your own freedoms. But it's only freedom until somebody gets hurt, and then it's no longer free. You gotta knock it off. So knock it off. Be willing to love your brethren. Rather than, "Oh, I don't see. There's no problem with it." Well, no. There's not a problem for you! But what about for them? "Well, they should grow up, man." Well, maybe they should. But you're not gonna be the one that's gonna do that. Be careful.

" 'Abstain from things strangled, and from blood.' " Again, that's a food regulation. The Jews, according to Leviticus 17, were told they had to bleed every animal thoroughly, that life was found in the blood; they should have a great respect for it. You eat the meat with the blood, you're to die. And the ultimate design, of course, was that there would be honoring the blood of the Lamb of Jesus Christ, who comes to give His life for ours. The Gentiles didn't bleed animals. "Medium rare, please. Thank you very much." They didn't care. Gentile idol worship involved the drinking of animal blood sometimes. At least they would have been real comfortable with that in their environment. And James is saying to the leaders, "Look, come on. You have brothers that are just struggling, man. Get away from that stuff." Right? Be sensitive to their persuasion and their aversions in the life that you're leading so that you can be one body with them. Be open to use the grace of God to make allowances for those that are growing in grace. Doctrine can be right, but living them out fully in these areas can take time. "The law of liberty," James says, "is the law of love." Freedom to love is a work of grace. Paul writes about - you might read Romans 14 (the entire chapter is just about one issue) - don't put drinkin' on Facebook. It's right there. (Laughing) "Here we are havin' drinks." Oh, it just kills me. Really?! And I want to write on there, "Used to go to Morningstar. Doesn't really come here anymore." (Laughing) That's what I want to put on there. I don't. I just block them. Go read Romans 14. It would do yourself some good. So anyway, that was the requirement of James. "We realize salvation is all about grace." Wonderful. But be careful. Be careful about the idols, be careful about sexual promiscuity. Much of the idol worship involved temple prostitutes. In the Gentile mind, it would have been wrong but easily tolerated because that was just life in the Gentile world. "Be sensitive to the fact that your Jewish brethren are gonna just freak out because that's way over the line with the law. It doesn't mean you should approve it, but you should be as appalled as they are. Stand with them. Help them to see what God's grace can do."

Verse 22 says, "Then it pleased the apostles and elders, with the whole church, to send chosen men of their own company" (again, 300 miles) "to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas, namely, Judas who was also named Barsabas, and Silas, leading men among the brethren. They wrote this letter by them: The apostles, the elders, and the brethren, to the brethren who are of the Gentiles in Antioch, Syria, and Cilicia." Notice James calls them "brethren," and then he sends "greetings." With James' authoritative word, any opposition in Jerusalem to the conversion of the Gentiles collapsed. The collective wisdom of the group was good. It left everyone cheering on this work that God had already begun to do. Notice it says it "pleased" the leadership. It "pleased" the church. I think unanimity probably was helpful. By the way, if you ever come to hold a biblical position where the majority of believers disagree with you, you're probably wrong. Because there is no private interpretation for Scripture (2 Peter 1:20). And sometimes we say, "The Lord showed me." I had a guy write me a note yesterday - told me it was 114 degrees where he was, and he said, "It's just a sign that the Lord'll be here by Thursday or Friday." And I wrote back and said, "You're kidding, right?" and he said, "No." And so I wrote back and said, "Well, you're the first one who's told me. I hope I hear it from others, and then we'll know if something's up or not." You can't just isolate Scripture. And notice it was a response to the grace of God argument that the apostles, the elders, the church, everyone said, "Amen." The majority of opinion, in terms of that doctrinal position, was to be pleased and thankful. So here's the problem. Paul goes home with Barnabas, but they filed the problem to begin with because they'd been having this harassment. So they said, "We'll send them back with a letter, and we'll send two guys from us so that you'll know it really came from us." It's not just Paul going, "Yeah, they told me everything was right. We'll send our couple of leading guys who have good reputations along with them to kind of bear the news," and they sent Judas (Barsabas, they called him) and Silas. And they sent a letter on official letterhead. It was addressed, like I said, to the Gentile "brethren," their family in the Lord. Great victory for the grace of God. And they sent "greetings." The word "greetings," "*chara*," is the word for grace or joy, grace.

Verse 24, "Since we have heard" (they write) "that some who went out from us have troubled you with words, unsettling your souls, saying, 'You must be circumcised and keep the law' - to whom we gave no such commandment - it seemed good to us, being assembled with one accord, to send chosen men to you with our beloved Barnabas and Paul, men who have risked their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. We have therefore sent Judas and Silas, who will also report

the same things by word of mouth." I love the fact that James and the church and the council were now isolating these Judaizers as imposters. "A - we didn't send them; B - we know that they trouble you. Their doctrines are false. We have sent two men to you who have actually - they're the real deal. They live what they believe. They've risked their lives for the gospel. Paul got beat up and left for dead last time he was up north. These guys are the real thing. And we've sent some other people with him to confirm what is being said. So, don't embrace those that are speaking false doctrines or come knocking on the door. That's not our position, and they don't represent us." And I love to hear that. We've had people leave our church claim that they were sent out by us and teach the most horrible things. And we usually don't know until somebody asks, and then we can disavow what they're doing. But it's the work of the enemy, isn't it? Notice that James' understanding of the Gentile converts around in the Cilicia area and the Galatia area was that they had been "troubled." The word "troubled" means to agitate, if you will, to upset or to steal. When legalism crawls into a church, it usually leaves fear and turmoil; no rest. When grace comes, there's a tremendous peace that comes. So, verse 25, 26, 27, "Here are our official representatives, the good guys." And he says, in verse 28, "For it seemed good to the Holy Spirit, and to us, to lay upon you no greater burden than these necessary things." The "necessary things" were what? Go back and read what Peter has been preaching - that all you have to do is believe in Christ, that your faith turns to Jesus; His sacrifice for yours - the exchange program. That's all that they.....those are the "necessary things." Faith. And he adds, "that you abstain from things offered to idols, from blood, from things strangled, and from sexual immorality. If you keep yourselves from these, you will do well." You'll be an answer, if you will, to the problem. Right? The fellowship will grow. The sensitivity to their Jewish counterparts and weak in their faith, would be helpful.

Verse 30, "So when they were sent off, they came to Antioch;" (300 miles to the north) "and when they had gathered the multitude together, they delivered the letter. When they had read it, they rejoiced over its encouragement." "Oh, man. Finally this is settled." Verse 32, "Now Judas and Silas, themselves being prophets also, exhorted and strengthened the brethren with many words. And after they had stayed there for a time, they were sent back with greetings from the brethren to the apostles." "Thank you for that decision." Verse 34, "However, it seemed good to Silas to remain there. Paul and Barnabas also remained in Antioch, teaching and preaching the word of the Lord, with many others also." And the ministry in Antioch - this missionary church - continued. So, imagine if you were a

Gentile believer in Antioch, you've been saved, you've heard the good news. Guys have come into town recently saying they're from Jerusalem, and, "Man, you're not really saved just yet. You're gonna have to have that circumcision done. You're gonna have to go to that Law class. You're gonna have to learn to speak the language. You're gonna have to go through a whole bunch of hoops." And you can't believe it. And Paul goes, "I'm gonna go fix this. I'm gonna take this to headquarters." And he's been gone a couple of weeks or a month or two. It's a long trip. And they come back, and everybody's just waitin'. "What did it turn out?" And this is what you get from Paul, "Oh, yeah. It's grace, man. It's only grace. It's always been about grace." And they get firsthand the news. They get to meet these two men that had been important, influential in the Jerusalem church, and they get to stay, and everyone gets to be encouraged. And they hang around for a while, teaching and ministering. The word "prophet" in the New Testament is not like it is in the Old Testament. The Old Testament prophets spoke for God to a nation, to a people, to a situation. Prophets in the New Testament are those who tell forth the Word of God. It is more telling the Word of God than telling the future. I know it's prophetic, but that's how the word "prophet" is used - a foreteller; not a fortune teller where everyone's looking ahead into the future, if you like. And it is a gift of the Spirit, and it is not just vested in an individual to reach a nation but to individuals in a local church. So that's the way the word is used here as well. They encourage the body. I'm sure the Gentiles were so happy to hear it. Verse 33, they hung around for a while. And then everyone said, "Are you guys goin' home? If you're goin' home, please thank the apostles for being sensitive to what God was doing." And as they were getting ready to leave, Judas left, but Silas found tremendous joy in this freedom and grace, and he decided to stay. He didn't have a place, maybe, to go back to; he just felt God calling him to plant himself here, and we know what begins in the next couple of verses. He will be the man that God would raise up to go with Paul to replace Barnabas, who is going to have a little run-in with Paul about grace, of all things, for an individual.

So, Satan loses a round. Grace through faith becomes the rule of the day. That doesn't mean these Judaizers go away. In fact, if you'll keep that in mind - since we're going through the book of Acts, we'll run into them a lot. And they'll be problematic and troublesome wherever they go. It is the same today. There is always the attack upon the grace of God. My father didn't get saved for 11 years because he couldn't understand grace. He would find the worst people in history and go, "So you mean to tell me....." and then he'd pick a bad guy....."if so and so got saved, all that junk that they did would be forgiven by God?" I'd go, "Yep."

He'd go, "Oh, that's not right." And that was his big argument. It was about grace. And I said, "Well, all right. Wait a minute. Let's turn this around. If we can find 51% of the population that does better things than you do, are you gonna go to hell then?" And he said, "Well I don't think that'd be right." I'd go, "Wait! You got more than half the people doin' better than you are!" "Well I don't think you'll find them." "But what if we did? We're just 'but if's'. That's what we're doin'." It took years. And then when he finally got saved, he was the happiest guy just to realize that God had cleansed the slate. "He didn't remember my sins anymore" (Hebrews 8:12). How good is that?!

So for now, we'll leave everybody happy. Silas will be in town. Paul and Barnabas are teaching in Antioch. They will stay there from 47 A.D. to 50 A.D. So for the next three years or so, that's what's happening at the church - Sunday morning, Wednesday night. I have no idea when they met. And then, in 50 A.D., we'll start in verse 36. Paul will set out, like I said, 2703 miles (if you measure it all out) and five and a half, almost six, years of ministry, and many more churches will get planted. And every one that he visited first will get to be visited again. So he'll go in backwards order through all of the churches in Galatia and then off to Europe as well. So, we will look at that beginning next week. I hope you'll read ahead and plan to be with us and follow along. We'll pick up the story, maybe down through a little part of chapter 16 where Timothy will join the group as well; and we'll get to run into Timothy.

So here're a couple of things to remember from this portion of Scripture. The gospel is the gospel of grace. Right? You can go preach to anybody. I don't care what you've done, where you've gone, God can fix it. He's paid the price to forgive you. All that's required in the Bible is calling upon the name of the Lord Jesus, and God'll do the rest. The rest. The rest. You get that? The rest. You have a great message for people. God's got a big eraser, and your chalkboard's full. But Jesus came, and He takes the eraser and takes it all away. Second of all, God's plans and promises to Israel as a nation will be fulfilled, and the Church Age is really that pause between God's dealing with Israel (that stopped and that's starting again) those last seven years. So, as soon as Jesus comes, and you're gathered, that time clock is going to run down, and the book of Revelation clearly marks out that seven-year stretch as God deals and reaches the world through the Jews. I am convinced that the last seven years of the Tribulation period - those seven years - probably more people will get saved during those seven years than have been saved up to now. We'll see how that works. Maybe we'll do Revelation sometime again. Thirdly,

and I want to leave you with this, limit your liberty because limiting your liberty is a true work of God's grace in action. True love denies yourself. And for the sake of a brother, just go without what you think you should have. Rather than arguing it's his problem, no, it's your problem. The weak are to be considered by the strong. If you think you're strong, then you have more responsibility. But together, we can grow. And then one day you can get in my car and listen to the Stones. (Laughing) Until then, KWVE. All right. I know it's an exaggerated example, but you get the message. Right? All right. Let's have communion, shall we?

Submitted by Maureen Dickson
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