

Grace Alone (Acts 15:1-16:5)

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[0 : 0 0] Acts 15 The Council at Jerusalem Some men came down from Judea to Antioch and were teaching their brothers Unless you are circumcised according to the custom taught by Moses you cannot be saved This brought Paul and Barnabas to a sharp dispute and debate with them So Paul and Barnabas were anointed along with some other believers to go up to Jerusalem to see the apostles and elders about this question The church sent them on their way and as they travelled through Phenotia and Samaria they told how the Gentiles had been converted This news made all the brothers very glad When they came to Jerusalem they were welcomed by the church and the apostles and elders to whom they reported everything God had done through them Then some of the believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees stood up and said

The Gentiles must be circumcised and required to obey the law of Moses The apostles and elders met to consider this question After much discussion, Peter got up and addressed them Brothers, you know that some time ago God made a choice among you that the Gentiles might hear from my lips the message of the gospel and believe God, who knows the heart, showed that he accepted them by giving the Holy Spirit to them just as he did to us He made no distinction between us and them for he purified their hearts by faith Now then, why do you try to test God by putting on the necks of the disciples a yoke that neither we nor our fathers have been able to bear?

No, we believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved, just as they are The whole assembly became silent as they listened to Barnabas and Paul telling about the miraculous signs and wonders God had done among the Gentiles through them When they finished, James spoke up Brothers, listen to me Simon has described to us how God at first showed his concern by taking from the Gentiles a people for himself The words of the prophets are in agreement with this as it is written After this, I will return and rebuild David's fallen tent Its ruins I will rebuild and I will restore it that the remnant of men may seek the Lord and all the Gentiles who bear my name says the Lord who does these things that have been known for ages It is my judgment, therefore that we should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God

Instead, we should write to them telling them to abstain from food polluted by idols from sexual immorality from the meat of the strangled animals and from blood For Moses has been preached in every city from the earliest times and is read in the synagogues on every Sabbath Thank you so much Yeah, I'll hold that thought about whether you can eat blood tofu or whatever else It's a bit of a wild chapter and yeah, I think we definitely need God's help So shall we pray and ask him to guide us as we hear from his word Lord Jesus Jesus, you walk among us with your spirit We've just heard from your spirit breathed words But do help us We want to know We want to be sure that it is by grace alone that we are saved through the finished work of Jesus Christ And help us to see what we can how we can live in a way that will help others to see this grace as well

Would you help us, Lord in these next few minutes In Jesus' name we pray Amen I've had a pretty relaxing weekend Lots of rain and so lots of drawing inside and so and actually yesterday one of our kids our eldest one said I'd love to draw a picture for you, Daddy So this is one she drew Now here's a very simple question What's the most important thing in this picture?

[4 : 29] The tree Good Well done, Venus How do you know? How do you know? It's in the middle, right? What's in the middle is usually the most important thing If you like to do photography you want to put what's in focus right?

That's what's most important isn't it? At a wedding banquet who gets the middle seat? The bride and the groom, right? At your birthday party do a group photo where do they try to shove you in front of the cake right in the middle?

So when it comes to the book of Acts which is what we've been journeying through as a church we want to ask what did the Holy Spirit inspire Luke to put at the middle of his 28 chapter Odyssey orderly account is it is it the Holy Spirit descending at Pentecost?

Does that go in the middle? No That was chapter 2 Is it Paul's conversion the apostle to the Gentiles? No that was a bit earlier on He puts a leader's meeting right in the middle of the book He's trying to tell us the most important thing right in the middle of the book of Acts is a meeting Now I love our leaders meetings It's so good to worship and pray together and make decisions for the good of a church but would I put it at the center of our banner that says PCBC?

I don't know Would you? Would it really describe our church? So why does chapter 15 sit in the middle of the book of Acts?

[6 : 00] Why is an argument over circumcision what to eat and not to eat why does it become as one author puts it the meeting that changed the world? And yet look in your Bibles just a bit further on the end of chapter 15 it keeps going and then actually goes to chapter 16 to the Bible verse that we just read for the first time verse 4 of chapter 16 and verse 5 As they travel from town to town they deliver the decisions decisions of this meeting and so the churches were strengthened in the faith and grew daily in numbers What a meeting What a decision If we want the church including our church to grow in maturity and in number we need to understand what's behind this meeting We need to read through these meeting minutes and get what is going on here The truth is that our brothers and sisters from way back affirm here is the biggest turning point in church history believe it or not

And you might think it goes without saying but it needs to be said At this meeting we affirmed as a body of Christ the gospel is that we are saved by grace alone by faith alone and in Christ alone We don't add anything else to what Christ has done And yet from this meeting we see that our holiness how we live can help to strengthen and grow the church to the ends of the earth Say that again The gospel is that we are saved through grace alone by faith alone in Christ alone But how we live our holiness will make that known to a watching world That's the big idea of this entire section We won't go through verse by verse today It is worth taking the time though to understand this meeting clearly So here's the agenda We're going to skim through the meeting in a couple of parts The Jerusalem Council meeting If you had an acronym maybe JCM

And then going from there we'll just see some of the aftermath What happens after this meeting Some of you this is your first time here at PCBC Welcome What we've seen previously is that the early church has been on mission They've been trying to share the good news about Jesus And we heard last week how God has opened a door of faith to the Gentiles to people who weren't ethnically Jewish Things at Antioch City Church at the end of chapter 14 Antioch's just right there just above Lebanon the city of Lebanon today sorry the country of Lebanon today That's where Antioch is Things were going well at that church Things were going well People were getting added to the church People were being encouraged But it's kind of like a long game of Jenga The more you move blocks upwards and upwards and upwards the more it feels a little bit wobbly Right As more and more people from non-Jewish second generation you know brothers and sisters join the church

The first generation brothers and sisters down at Jerusalem they're getting a little bit worried They're getting a little bit worried What are they worried about? Have a look at your Bibles It says in verse 1 Some men they came down from Judea down because Jerusalem's on a hill so they come down the hill and they start to teach the brothers unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses you cannot be saved In other words they wanted the Antioch Christians up there to also become Jewish first Their message was Jesus is for everyone who becomes Jewish Jesus is for everyone so long as you're cut the same way as we are And this message is so abhorrent so offensive to Paul and Barnabas that when they hear about this they push back Did you see?

They argue they dispute strongly against it They flip because they know firsthand they've risked their lives for the fact that God's family now includes people who aren't Jewish Gentiles people with no Jewish background cannot be excluded from God's family and in fact this issue is so important that it's quite likely that as Paul was kind of resting at Antioch as we heard last at the end of the last chapter he was writing some letters and one of the letters he wrote was to the believers that he'd just met in the region of Galatia where there were cities like Antioch-Pisidia Iconium Lystra Darby So anyone read the letter to the Galatians?

[10 : 49] Yeah So it's quite likely Paul wrote that letter at this point in time And listen I'll just read a few snippets from that letter Listen to Paul's heart He says in the book of Galatians chapter 1 verse 6 I'm astonished that you are so quickly turning deserting him who called you in the grace of Christ and you're turning to a different gospel Or Galatians 3 verse 1 O foolish Galatians who has bewitched you?

Having begun by the Spirit are you now being perfected by the flesh? Or Galatians chapter 5 verse 2 Look I Paul say to you if you accept circumcision Christ will be on no advantage to you What's going on here?

Paul is not against circumcision We'll see this later on What he's against is taking a cultural practice and saying you need this to be made right with God If anyone says that that is poison Get the difference You can be Jewish and be a Christian There are many brothers and sisters in Christ who have Jewish background But you do not have to be Jewish to be a Christian See the difference?

There's a difference And so the Antioch church wrestling with this issue they send Paul and Barnabas They're going to go and have a chat with the brothers and sisters in Jerusalem to try and sort this out Along the way they tell Phoenicians and Samaritans about the Gentiles coming to Jesus and they love it It's just that now they have to go talk to the people in Jerusalem Mother church First generation They're trying to work things out together And it starts well Verse 5 says they're warmly welcomed And they get the update about Look the church is growing It's wonderful But then Luke tells us Verse 5 It's believers who used to be Pharisees A very strict group of Jews Who then say Look These new Christians they need to be circumcised And so from the outset this is not a us versus them debate Alright Because it says here they are believers So how we talk together matters

These are fellow Christians who nonetheless have a warped understanding of the gospel Did people in the 15th century did they need to buy indulgences you know pay money to the mother church at the time to have their sins forgiven Did Maori in the early days of colonization did they need to adopt western dress and western customs before they could be a Christian Do you and I need to know Cantonese to be baptized as a believer at PCBC Be careful how you answer If it's slightly yes it might be a different gospel altogether to the gospel of Christ Friends the good news of the Bible the good news of Christianity is that Christ's death on the cross for our sins his resurrection three days later is the full and final basis of how we can be made right with God nothing else should be added to him

[14:17] If you're here and you're not a Christian you can come to Jesus today by turning away from yourself trusting in Christ for your salvation and you can receive full forgiveness of sins right this moment You don't need to be baptized into a group You don't need to join the church You don't have to do any good deeds to be accepted by God You just need to hold to Jesus trust in his finished work for you This is the gospel This is what sets Christianity apart from every other religion and they're trying to fight for this This is why the dispute is so important They kind of lay out the dispute Now let's think about the debate So I take that in a meeting like this I don't know if you've been in meetings before Sometimes you want to be respectful and courteous You let the older folks speak first I think that's what happens here So I think verse 6 it seems like some of the oldest people they share their concerns right and the concerns

I think from the ex-Pharisee believers is this I think the concern is this if they don't get circumcised how can they connect and hang out with really strict Jewish people our friends and family that need to know Jesus Can't they just make some accommodations Can't they just meet us halfway We're about to have a combined worship service across different age groups and cultures on Saturday If you're trying to plan that service you'll know some of the discussions that go around it What songs do we sing Can we meet each other halfway So when Peter gets up no one can deny his authority Peter some of you might know he is one of Jesus' closest disciples and we've already heard how God rescued him from execution in Acts 12 and I think it's for this very moment God wanted Peter to be here at this meeting to make three important contributions to the discussion

Firstly Peter he verse 7 and he recounts his experience right Remember guys I've told you this Cornelius' story I was there when I saw the Holy Spirit descend on him someone who was not Jewish I saw how God welcomed him into our family God clearly gave them the Holy Spirit too And then verses 8 to 9 he tells those listening that what they have experienced with the Holy Spirit is the same as what the Jewish people have experienced Remember Pentecost We had the same experience as they did And then verse 11 he says something so crucial but we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus just as they will No matter our heritage who our parents and grandparents and ancestors were we are saved through the grace of the

Lord Jesus Jesus You know what Paul and Barnabas could have said the same thing couldn't they They've been saying it all this time but it's great that Peter says it because Peter is connected to the Jerusalem crowd He is the main evangelist remember to the Jewish church he was part of Jesus inner circle I think that kind of made his testimony more convincing and actually notice who speaks very little in this meeting Barnabas and Paul right they've been speaking all along the up and down the coast in Galatia now back here among the Jewish uncles Paul the preacher is happy to sit back and when they speak verse 12 tells us they just share a little bit about what the signs and wonders were that God did among the nations again reminding them the Gentiles them coming to God that has God's own stamp of approval God was there

God was there how does the meeting progress next have a look at verse 13 after they finished speaking James replied brothers and sisters listen to me you know it's formal when someone stands up and says brothers esteemed counsel you know this James who is he we've actually already seen a James executed in Acts 12 so I think this is probably James the half brother of Jesus so and we believe that he was probably the first senior pastor of the church in Jerusalem and what James does here is that he backs up what Peter and Barnabas have experienced and he backs it up as a pastor would right by going to the Bible he quotes one of the Old Testament prophets his name is Amos and in Amos 9 verse 11 to 12 and verse 16 to 17 Amos he looks forward to a day when there's going to be a restored kingdom in David's line and it's going to include not just

[19 : 30] Jewish people but Gentiles and so what James is doing when he shares with the Jerusalem crowd is saying read your Bibles you've heard about this happening for ages and now it's happening the people of God now includes Gentiles too and so he tells the church his view right the senior pastor's view verse 19 my judgment is this we should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God James is not going to allow something like circumcision keeping the entire law of Moses by this time people were trotting out like all 600 and something commandments to keep he's not going to say that is going to define who's in and out of Jesus's church and so James says let's write a letter to these new brothers and sisters even the ones we've never met and let's say don't worry we're not going to require that you don't need to be circumcised you don't need to be

Jewish to become a what does verse 20 and 21 tell us he immediately gives them four things not to do and this is a real struggle isn't it what's going on here I have to admit I wrestled with this all week I was telling Cheryl I'm still trying to work this out so this is hot off the press stuff let's unpack the verse a bit he says instead we should write to them telling them to abstain and so the word abstain is trying to get you to avoid something and there are four things he says to avoid food polluted by idols from sexual immorality from the meat of strangled animals and from blood and I take that blood from those animals scholars usually divide into two views why on earth would James list these specific things one take is this James is trying to help non

Jewish Christians who have never read their Bibles before and give them like a cheat sheet on how to live as Christians in their day and age how are you going to flee from idolatry how will you not live like all the other people around you do those who go to the temple every day who make sacrifices every day who in fact maybe don't see it as any problem if there are prostitutes at the temple just go hang out with them it's kind of like a mini instruction manual or quick guide to how to be a Christian in their day and age so one reason perhaps is to avoid idolatry and actually some people would just read this as is and you might meet some Christians that say I'm not going to eat anything with blood in it right and of course sexual immorality is on the list for first century Christians these are all forms of idol worship to run away from now the other angle to view this is that verse 20 and 21 what's here describes kind of habits if you were not a

Jewish person that would make it really difficult to then sit down with a really strict Jewish person right so the issue here is fellowship for example I visited a brother's house recently right first time I've been in their house and the first thing I had to ask was this excuse me do I take my shoes off or not have you ever had that experience right because you don't know and there was a sign that I had to read right that said please take your shoes off okay got it got it all right so I did now I could have said I'm free in Christ brother and to stomp right in with my sneakers and I don't know what that conversation afterwards would have looked like though probably wouldn't have helped us to sit down and enjoy fellowship together and so perhaps these four things are trying to help us to go well look you are free in Christ okay don't be bound by but for the sake of Jewish brothers and sisters who really get sensitive about these issues turn away from them abstain from them because we want to fellowship together from different backgrounds and so if you just avoid these couple of things that they really are sensitive about maybe this will help bring unity so which is it is this is how you live as a

Christian or this is how we hang out together as brothers and sisters maybe it's both think about one word that I think covers both think about the word holiness what comes to mind when you think holiness because remember the context God's people they were once completely Jewish what were they called to do they were called to be set apart from among the nations they were given very specific rules and requirements I rescued you out of Egypt now this is how you live as distinct people God says to them be holy for I am holy holy basically means be set apart be distinct but now fast forward thousands of years later here is a church in Christ the Messiah the promised one and they have never read the Torah the Old Testament they don't know what it's like to be holy in the Old

[25 : 07] Testament way and they have family members who hang out at the temple they the meat market and they don't mind and so we tell them you don't have to become Jewish like us to be a Jesus follower and yet you do need to be distinct be holy be set apart from your old ways be holy because I'm holy and it carries through the Old Testament Jewish person who abstains from a prawn laksa is saying to a watching world the Lord my God matters most the Christian brother who turns away and fights against the temptation to watch pornography they're saved by grace alone yes but now that message has credibility because they are setting themselves apart for a watching world to say he's different I want to know more grace the sister who avoids gossiping all the time or lying is saved by grace alone through

Christ but now her friends and family see a change because they're holy and they want to hear more about what's made that happen who has made this possible and maybe the English service here at PCBC that welcomes different languages and cultures we're saved by grace alone we don't have to add anything to it and yet how we live how we go about our lives can either attract or push others away be holy because I'm holy says the Lord so I don't know if a church council here in this spot met right what might it decide for us we'll have to maybe talk about that together in your groups but maybe we can keep reminding each other don't worry you don't have to be from Hong Kong to be a Christian here never tell each other that you have to be we're saved by grace alone don't

English and you love Jesus come on in maybe our song choices how we present on a Sunday here at English could consider different people who might have different concerns maybe we could consider kids learning to read how can we serve them best maybe we can consider aunties and uncles whose English is still improving how do we help them out and maybe we can invite Hugo and Daisy others like them to share with us more often to remind each other we are one church distinct set apart that might be the way of the cross for PCBC and as we look in our Bibles as they talk about this very important decision verse 22 you'll see that James suggestions they're supported aren't they right they're supported by the apostles the elders and actually with the whole church this is a shared decision and so they send a group of people from

Jerusalem up to Antioch church with this message this decision in a letter the letter is what we read in verse 22 down to verse 29 I love it because actually verse 29 it ends your translation say farewell but it's literally be strong so kind of saying but relax you don't have to be Jewish to be Christian just do these four things Kia kaha is world changing because it affirms the gospel of Jesus is for everyone for all peoples from this decision we can now find Christians worshipping in every continent on the world all around worshipping in hundreds of different languages different styles different cultures different age groups it's the reason why I think our church can exist today because of this decision and

I love it I love the reaction of the Gentiles in Antioch we see in verses 30 to 33 after the meeting when they read this letter they rejoice sometimes you read a letter and you're like oh it's tax again oh why do I have to vote we don't really rejoice about those letters this letter is different they rejoice maybe they were a bit scared that head office in Jerusalem they were going to tell them to shut down the party or go start a different group you can't be part of us but praise God instead of being asked to become Jewish they say welcome to the church here are some four house rules that's going to help you to flee from idolatry to come together as one big family and so verse 31 they rejoice in the Lord they are encouraged they are strengthened who knew so much unity could come from a church meeting reading and rejoicing and yet briefly

[30 : 23] Luke also leaves us in the rest of the chapter with two ironic events at the end from verse 35 to 41 we see that amidst all the unity there comes a sharp disagreement between Barnabas and Paul some of you remember Acts 13 when a guy called John Mark had to leave halfway through their first missions journey we're not told why but maybe Paul thought he was a quitter stopped halfway to go see his mum maybe he just needed to harden up I don't know what Paul was thinking but certainly he didn't want to bring him again as they went on another missions trip but then Barnabas is the opposite let's bring him let's bring him I want to take John with us give him another chance and it's on this issue that sadly they disagree so strongly that they split up they don't serve together anymore has that ever happened among us surely when I read this

I thought wow I've done the same too been like Paul been a bit too strong jumped to conclusions about someone without understanding their situation Paul needed to soften up he needed to listen to Barnabas here but sadly he didn't and so their partnership split up and maybe that's a warning for us we can be united in Christ on the things that matter and mission salvation is by grace alone we say all the right things and yet we might have different ideas on how to get there and sometimes we split up we split up and yet we see God orchestrating all this don't we God is not shocked he's still in control even amidst the hardest of separations it leads to two mission do we not see that Barnabas takes Mark he goes to Cyprus Paul chooses Silas who was in Jerusalem at that meeting and now there are two mission teams that multiply their ministry they didn't intend it that way but

God is in control and now these teams are ready to bring the gospel to the ends of the earth so yes we can be sad when there's division in our church and yet let's be also glad even when we disagree God can still use it even when we head to different directions maybe even different churches God is still working his plan out and what about chapter 16 those first few verses this is pretty ironic too right because what's going on here Paul finds a guy called Timothy and Lystra and he has him circumcised what didn't we just then they just argue for ages that you don't have to be circumcised to become a Christian poor guy right you know imagine you Timothy lived in Lystra heard the gospel I want to be a missionary okay but first I'll send you for a special medical but know the difference know the difference friends yes if anything other than

Jesus is required for salvation we should oppose that but here the decision to circumcise Timothy it's not based on salvation but for evangelism and mission it says that he doesn't want to cause unnecessary trouble to those who were Jews who lived in the area it's a willing sacrifice that they're making that mostly Timothy is making it's not a demand but it will make it easier to accept the gospel why not do it after what's mine a surgery for the good of souls won for eternity maybe that's a thinking and whenever you guys complain about sacrificing maybe think of Timothy's example right just be thankful and we think about this through church history Hudson Taylor he was not told to wear Chinese clothes okay to go into inland China to reach the

Chinese but he did it willingly why he cared for them he wanted to minister as effectively to them as possible get rid of anything he was willing to do that our friends from Bible college Derek and Anna they did not need to give up pork or alcohol when they lived in Southeast Asia but they willingly did so not for their salvation but to build bridges to win Muslim peoples to the gospel of Christ to get a hearing with them for what it's worth here's a couple of choices I personally made over the years different places and times for holiness and for fellowship in Christ for people who don't know Christ to receive him perhaps I could but I haven't watched an R-rated movie for years I could not do it but I brought halal meals to church lunches before I've sung worship songs that

[35 : 39] I don't particularly enjoy I've enjoyed all the ones we did by the way I put my mask on in certain places and then I'll take it off when I chat with certain people I haven't dyed my hair in years and I use emojis in chats now what sacrifices will you make so that others will hear the gospel look when to do something and when not to do it I mess up all the time I'm sure you've experienced that but because Jesus welcomes me I want to welcome others especially that don't know him yet because Jesus gave up everything for me I'll give up my rights my need to do this or that so that more experience of grace will happen among people who don't know him so we come to the end of it don't we and we remind us to build the numbers here at

PCBC stick to the main point the focus the gospel is that we are saved by grace alone and Christ alone but our holiness will help others to see that happen so friends let's make Jesus the center of our picture not our worship attenders not our service not our good works not even our baptism and yet because of Jesus let's willingly make sacrifices so that more of our friends and family can meet Jesus for God's glory shall we pray Lord you call us to live such good lives among the foreigners around us those that don't know you and we confess we sometimes live very different little that's different forgive forgive us Lord make us holy set apart distinct but free us that this does not win our salvation or our standing with you free us to remember that we have been saved by the blood of

Christ and it's in Christ alone that our hope is found help us to remember this when times are tough help us to rejoice in this with our brothers and sisters we pray all these things in your son's precious name amen