

Acts 15:1-35 - Williams

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Preacher: Tad Williams

[0:00] Well, it was just about one year ago that Holy Covenant Church welcomed Dr. Dan Block into our pulpit. I don't know if you remember, before we met here, we were meeting in the church formerly known as Bethany Chapel.

And Dr. Block was with us for two sermons to start our series in Deuteronomy. And if you don't know or remember, Dr. Block is retired now as a longtime professor of Old Testament.

And he has written several major commentaries on Old Testament books. And so he's a real expert. And it was a privilege to have him with us in our pulpit. And it was a special privilege for Amber and I to welcome Dr. Block and his wife to our home for lunch after, I think, his second sermon.

And we had a wonderful time with him. And when Dr. Block was at our house for lunch, I decided to impress him with my theory. Decided to impress Dr. Block with my theory. And so I said, Dr. Block, I have a theory.

And he said, okay, let's hear it. And I said, here's my theory. My theory is that the religion that we call Judaism actually begins at the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

[1:14] Because before then, people would worship the God of the Bible. But then God reveals himself in Jesus Christ.

And those who accept the revelation of God in Christ go on in the worship of the God of the Bible. And they're called Christians. And then those who reject Christ, they go on and they're called Jews. And so that's how Judaism begins. And he said, Tad, that's totally wrong. He just blew up my theory.

Didn't even hesitate. That's totally wrong. He said, Judaism begins several hundred years before Jesus Christ in the developments of the second temple period.

I was like, oh. I want to take a few minutes to explain what that means. And share some of those things I learned from Dr. Block that afternoon.

[2:16] Because I think it's very important to understand our passage here this morning. Okay. So let me give you a definition. Second temple Judaism. Second temple Judaism is what historians and theologians refer to as this period in Jewish history that begins when the Jews return from the Babylonian exile and they rebuild the temple.

Remember this is recounted in the books of Ezra and Nehemiah for us. They rebuild the temple. And that's called the second temple. And the second temple period stretches from then in about 516 B.C.

to when the Roman army destroys the temple in Jerusalem in the year 70 A.D. So 70 A.D. after Christ. The Romans destroy the temple. But the second temple period from 516 B.C. to 70 A.D. And in that period of Jewish history, there are significant developments and changes in the practice of the Jewish religion. Let me give you just a few of these.

Synagogues emerge. Synagogues. Have you ever noticed in the Old Testament, you read it, there's no synagogues. Nobody goes to synagogue in what we call our Old Testament.

[3:37] Synagogues emerge in these years between our Testaments. And Jewish people begin meeting in these local centers to read the Torah, to talk about it, to hear teaching on it, to pray together in these local synagogues.

As that happens, rabbis emerge in Judaism. Rabbis. Again, in the Old Testament, there's no mention of rabbis.

You ever notice that? There's priests. There's priests. And priests are hereditary descendants of Aaron who lead sacrifices in the temple.

But as synagogues emerge, rabbis emerge, this whole new class of religious leaders and experts.

And the thing with rabbis is they are experts in the law, in the Torah. And they're experts in talking about it and making arguments from it.

[4:37] And here's something Dr. Block told me that afternoon. This is what he said. He said, That's a big argument.

And Dr. Block said, That's a big argument.

That's a much more dangerous theory than my theory. So I want to acknowledge that, that that's a very controversial theory that would certainly be rejected by Jewish theologians.

Most Jewish theologians and historians would probably reject that analysis. But I do want to present that this morning to think about that there are very significant developments in the practice of Judaism that occur in the centuries before Jesus and before the apostles and before this book of Acts that we're studying.

And these are very significant.

[6:34] For the discussion and before the discussion and before the Bible. For the discussion and debate that happens in our text this morning. Here's what I'd like to do. I'd like to read through the story again with you.

Noticing important things along the way. And then if we don't run out of time. I have two denials and three affirmations. So two denials.

There are two important things we need to recognize are not happening in the passage. And three important things that I think are happening. We'll go over those at the end. Okay. Let's read it. Let's turn our attention to Acts 15 verse 1.

But some men came down from Judah and were teaching the brothers unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses. You cannot be saved.

If you have your journal Bible circle the word saved. The question here is how are we saved? How are these Gentiles saved?

[7:34] Salvation. This is the core question. The core theological question in the book of Acts. This is actually the core question of every religion in the history of the world.

How are we to be saved? There's this worldwide understanding that okay there's a human problem and we need to be rescued or saved somehow.

It's like how can we be saved? And these men come from Jerusalem, from Judea and they say unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses you cannot be saved.

It's important to notice these men are probably believers in Jesus Christ. They're probably early Christians.

But they have this idea that I suggest to you is steeped now in centuries of Jewish thought of the importance of the law and the necessary obedience to the law that is required in order to be saved.

[8:40] And so they come to Antioch. Okay the scene begins in Antioch. Paul and Barnabas are in Antioch about 250 miles north of Jerusalem. And this city that has become sort of the center of activity in the book of Acts.

And this is the argument in verse 2. Paul and Barnabas had no small discussion and debate. Indeed tremendous debate and discussion.

And the decision is made for Paul and Barnabas and some of the others to go down to Jerusalem to the apostles and the elders to ask this question. To get a ruling on this question that has embroiled the church in Antioch in debate.

And so verse 3 being sent on their way by the church. They pass through Phoenicia and Samaria moving south towards Jerusalem. Notice very interesting. They stop along the way describing in detail the conversion of the Gentiles and brought great joy to all the brothers.

One commentator said they made campaign stops along the way. That might not be accurate but it is curious. They had this big debate. They're sent to Jerusalem.

[9:51] Why do they stop along the way? They do seem to be making their case along the way. This would certainly ratchet up the pressure on this council in Jerusalem discussion.

If you have all these people who have just heard. But anyway they make their way making stops along the way. In verse 4 when they came to Jerusalem they were welcomed by notice 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.

So the whole church in Jerusalem the apostles were to understand the original 12 apostles or at least some most of them. It doesn't say exactly. Elders there are now elders in the church in Jerusalem.

Apostles and elders. Maybe some of those are the same people. And then these opponents speak up.

[10:57] Verse 5 but notice again they are believers. They're believers in Jesus. They believe in Jesus. But they are convinced that in order to be saved you have to believe in Jesus and keep the works of the law.

In particular you must be circumcised and keep the law of Moses. So the scene is set. The tension has been built into the story.

All the major players of the book of Acts are there. Peter, Paul, Barnabas, the apostles, James, the leader of the Jerusalem church, the elders.

This is a big deal. And so they begin with what's called the Jerusalem council. This is verses 6 through 21.

These verses are comprised of three speeches. Peter makes a speech. We're given a summary of a speech by Paul and Barnabas.

[11:54] The text doesn't tell us exactly what Paul and Barnabas say. It summarizes it. And then James gives a speech that sort of settles the debate.

So let's look at some of these details in these speeches. Verse 7. What Peter is referring to is the experience he had in the house of Cornelius.

Cornelius, where after he receives this vision, he's told to go and he goes to Cornelius' house, where all Cornelius' family and friends, it says, are gathered. And Peter preaches to them.

This is actually the third time in the book of Acts that we're given this story. And when you see something like that, you should say, oh, okay, this is very important. It's repeated multiple times.

And so I'm going to flip back right now to Acts chapter 10, and I want to read what happens as Peter is preaching in the house of Cornelius. Chapter 10, verse 44.

[13:10] And he commanded them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ.

Then they asked him to remain for some days. The key thing to see here is that the Holy Spirit is poured out on Cornelius, these Gentiles.

Before they've done anything, they have not been circumcised. They have not engaged in any ritual purification, water washing.

They have not even been baptized, though Peter quickly advises them to be baptized. But baptism does not precede the pouring out of the Holy Spirit in this example.

And so this is what Peter brings up in this council. And the point that he's making is that none of those works or actions or obedience to law things preceded the Holy Spirit being poured out on these Gentiles.

[14:34] Peter is saying they were saved by the grace of God.

And by responding in faith to the message they heard about Jesus, the good news, the gospel, Peter says.

I preach the gospel to them. And they responded in faith, and the Holy Spirit was poured out on them prior to them doing anything.

Verse 9, Peter says, And he made no distinction between us and them, having cleansed their heart 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? Why are you placing a burden of law keeping on them that neither we nor our fathers have been able to bear?

[15:46] Verse 11, But we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus just as they will. That's a beautiful, clear statement of the gospel, of the good news, of how salvation comes to us.

By the grace of the Lord Jesus, through faith, that's how we're saved. More on that later.

Verse 12, I just did the Dave Papendorf. Did you notice that? More on that later. Verse 12, All the assembly fell silent at this speech from Peter. This is the last time we hear from Peter, actually, in the book of Acts.

This is his final speech. This is the way to go out. If you're going to give a final speech, give this one. It's a good one. It's the final speech from Peter in the book of Acts. The assembly falls silent.

Verse 12, They listened to Barnabas and Paul as they related what signs and wonders God had done through them. After they finished speaking, James replied, Brothers, listen to me.

[16:51] James, the leader of the Jerusalem church. At this time, you remember Peter fled after he was released from prison and says, Tell James and this and that. There seems to be a handoff to James as the leader of the Jerusalem church.

James replies, Brothers, listen to me. Simeon, he refers to Peter by his Hebrew name. Simeon 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. And then James quotes from the prophet Amos. And the move, the move James is making here is he's saying, Hey, this is not a new idea.

And this is not a new religion for the Gentiles to be included into the salvation of Israel. James says, The prophets agree.

The prophets said that's what would happen. And now this is what's happening. It's happening. We see this quite a bit in the book of Acts.

[18:03] Often when apostles quote the Old Testament, this is what they're doing. They're referring to these passages and promises in the Old Testament where God speaks of the future inclusion of the Gentiles into the people of God.

The blessings of Abraham. Blessing of Abraham that will go to all the nations. And so this is what James does. And he's agreeing that salvation has come to the Gentiles.

Then verse 19. Therefore my judgment, James said, is that we should not trouble those of the Gentiles who turn to God. Should not trouble them, but we should write to them to abstain from things polluted by idols, from sexual immorality, from what has been strangled, and from blood. Four things. But notice, very importantly, verse 21. James says, James is saying the reason we give these four requirements to these Gentiles is for the sake of Jews who are meeting in the synagogues.

For the witness to the Jews who are still meeting in synagogues everywhere, reading Moses. Jews who may have a malformed understanding of the law.

[19:30] Who may actually worship the law. Who may have actually shifted their worship from the God who revealed the law to Moses to the law itself.

And are convinced that adherence to the law is what saves them. James says, we want to be sensitive to those people. We want to be mindful of their thinking and aware of our witness to Jews. Not Jewish believers. He points to Jews who meet in synagogues every Sabbath. So that's his speech.

Quickly. Then it seemed good to the apostles and the elders and the whole church to choose men from among them and send them to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas. So they sent Judas.

Called Barsabbas and Silas. Leading men. With the following letter. Then we get the text of this letter. The letter is almost exactly what James has said in his speech.

[20:41] I'll point out as we pass through just the tone of unity in this letter. The letter is intended to create unity in a context that has been embroiled in intense debate.

In Antioch but also in Jerusalem. And so the letter has an incredible tone of graciousness and gentleness. The brothers it begins.

The brothers. In Jerusalem. Both the apostles and the elders. Unity amongst the apostles and the elders. To the brothers who are of the Gentiles in Antioch. Could you imagine reading that letter? Getting that letter in Antioch. And here are these guys in Jerusalem and they're calling you brother. The brothers in Jerusalem to the brothers in Antioch.

The Gentile. Gentiles in Antioch are now brothers. Verse 24. Since we have heard that some persons have gone out from us and troubled you with their words.

[21:48] They disassociate themselves from these people. These persons have gone out even though we didn't send them. We with one accord have chosen men and are sending them to you with our beloved Barnabas and Paul.

A clear affirmation of Barnabas and Paul. An establishing of the credentials and the authenticity of Barnabas and Paul. And so they send two of the leading men.

Silas and Judas and Silas. To go with Paul and Barnabas and go deliver this letter. Where they do give them these four admonitions.

But they do not require circumcision. Or they do not require the keeping of the law in order to be saved. That's the key move of the Jerusalem council and of this letter. So when they were sent off they went down to Antioch. And they gathered the congregation. They delivered the letter. And when they read it they rejoiced because of the encouragement. [22:59] And they spent time together. Remaining in Antioch. There's a lot more we can say. There's many more fascinating details. But this is a momentous occasion in the history of Christianity.

And in the development of the earliest church. Where this key question. Comes to the surface. And the answer that is given is that.

Salvation. Is by the grace of God. Through faith in God. And it's on the basis of that alone. That God pours out his spirit. And gives you the spirit. To indwell. To live within you. One commentator said.

The letter is one of the most courageous documents in history. Because amongst other things. It represents the rulers in Jerusalem. Surrendering control.

[24:08] They do not require everyone to become a Jew. And to develop this complex system of laws and rules. That has emerged. Of which they could be the experts.

And make sure everyone has to keep coming to Jerusalem. With their tricky questions. About how to work this law thing out. They don't do that. There's this incredible.

Openness. And they do not require Gentiles to become Jews. Or develop or adopt all these customs. Okay. I don't know.

There's a lot here folks. I have two denials. And three affirmations. I'm going to have to go pretty fast. Are you ready? Here we go. Two denials. Denial number one.

This is not a compromise with the circumcision party. Regarding the basis of salvation. Some people say that. They read this passage. And they say. Well the Jerusalem council in their wisdom.

[25:09] They come up with a really great compromise. They figure out a middle way. Between the circumcision party. And Paul and Barnabas. And so they arrive at a compromise.

No. Wrong. This is not a compromise with the circumcision party. This is not.

Let's downplay certain requirements. And lift up other requirements. That are necessary for salvation. This is a rejection. Of the idea. That anything else is required for salvation.

Other than faith in Jesus Christ. Paul will clarify in Romans chapter 8. Verses 9 to 10. That we belong to Christ.

If the spirit of Christ dwells within you. This indwelling occurs. When we respond to the message.

The good news of Jesus Christ. In faith. This is exactly what happens to Cornelius.

[26:07] And his household. And Peter upholds this. As the pattern of salvation. The pattern. The only pattern. So it's not a compromise. With ideas.

That other things are also required. Let's reject that. Rejection number two. Denial number two. This is not an indictment.

On the value of the law. As given and intended by God. Okay. Peter. Refers to the law.

As a yoke. Terrible. And so you might read that. And think. Well that's how I should think about the law. And that's how I should talk about the law of God. I want to deny that. I want to reject that.

We just had a whole catechism class. Where at our table. We certainly got into big debates about this. Peter does not give an indictment on the value of the law. As given and intended by God.

[27:04] That's the key. I think Peter does give an indictment of the law. And how it's developed in the recent. Somewhat recent history of Judaism. In the second temple period.

Peter says that's a yoke. That our fathers and we cannot bear. Why are you trying to impose this on the Gentiles? But. Therefore Peter's speech is not an example.

Of how the Christian believer. Should think about the law of God. Or the role of the law. In the life of obedience. Peter's speech is a criticism. Of the distorted role of the law.

Held by many in his day. Including those believers in Jesus Christ. Who are also members of this circumcision party. That's what he's indicting. A distorted view of the law. A view of the law.

That raises it. To the level of faith. Jesus Christ. Says this. In Matthew 18. He says. Come to me.

[28:05] All you who are weary and burdened. And I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you. And learn from me. For I am gentle and humble in heart. And you will find rest for your souls.

For my yoke. Is easy. And my burden is light. Jesus talks about his yoke. His burden. He does not say. Hey come to me. There's no yoke.

No burden. Yoke free life. No. It's not. It's not what Jesus says. He says. My yoke is easy. And my burden is light. And so we can say with the psalmist. I love your law. Oh Lord. I meditate on it day and night.

The law of the Lord is a lamp. It is a light for our path. A lamp for our head. And it is the gracious revelation of God.

[29:06] Of his character. And of his design for the world. But don't raise it to the level of. You have to keep it perfectly. Or you have to keep it in all these ways. In order to be saved.

By grace we are saved through faith. And not of ourselves. It is a gift from God. Not of works. Lest anyone should boast.

I might have just defaulted to the King James. Did I? That's I think. What I was raised on and learned. But anyway.

I very much appreciated a comment from Kent Hughes. Pastor Kent Hughes. He says this. Listen to this. History and experience have proven. That anything made a co-requirement with faith.

Soon shoves faith aside. And becomes the means of salvation. So anything. That we as humans make a co-requirement with faith.

[30:10] Anything. Whatever that is. It soon shoves faith aside. And that thing becomes the boss. And that thing feeds on itself.

And grows. And is unending. In the requirements it will put on us. To justify ourselves before God. Because we can't do it.

But that thing. Whatever that thing is. If it's circumcision. If it's keeping dietary laws.

If it's baptism. If it. Whatever that thing is. When we think about salvation. Well. I'm skipping to my next point. All right.

Two denials. Three affirmations. Affirmation number one. This is. This passage is.

[31:12] A foundational text. For the doctrine of salvation. By grace. Through faith. In Jesus Christ alone. This is. The main theological point. Of the passage.

And highlighted. By this text. Placement in the center. Of the book of Acts. It's helping us. To understand. That this is the main. Theological concern. Of the entire book of Acts. When we think about.

Justification. Okay. Salvation. What it means. To. Be made right. With God. And Paul. Will later. Call that justification.

We think about. What does it take. To become right. With God. There's. There's two choices. It's. Faith in Jesus Christ. And. Dot.

Dot. Dot. Or. It's. Faith in Jesus Christ. Alone. There's. There's only two choices. Faith in Jesus Christ.

[32:12] And. Fill in the blank. And you can fill in the blank. With so much stuff. Unending. Right. I just said. Unending. What will be required. To finish that sentence.

Or. It's faith in Jesus Christ. Alone. And so. This passage. Clearly. Upholds. This doctrine. Of. Salvation. By faith.

In Christ. Alone. That's affirmation. Number one. Affirmation. Number two. This passage. Is. A call. For unity.

Among. Believers. Right. And. The letter. I pointed that out. The letter's intention. Is to. Create unity. And to calm.

This raging debate. And these quarrels. And the disunity. But let's just think. A little bit. About how incredible. This is. This unity. Is fostered. By the courage.

[33:06] Of the Jerusalem council. In granting freedom. To Gentile. Converts. The freedom. To not become Jews. They don't have to become Jews. They don't have to adopt.

These rituals. And practices. And customs. They're not requiring that. There's incredible freedom. Being granted. In this letter.

This decision. Of the Jerusalem council. Has been called. One of the most courageous.

Documents. In history. It creates the possibility. Of a multi-ethnic.

Multi-cultural. Christian church. Comprised of people. Who speak different languages. Eat different foods. Wear different clothes. But are all united. By faith in Jesus Christ. In the indwelling.

Of the spirit. That's the basis. Of the unity. And this is what. Allows this message. To continue. To grow. And flourish. And be received.

[34:03] By Gentiles. And we are here today. Because of this decision. Of the Jerusalem council. And the leading. Of the Holy Spirit. In establishing.

The basis of salvation. And the foundation. Of our unity. And so this passage. Is an incredible call. For unity. Among believers. Here's affirmation.

Number three. The final point. Final affirmation. This passage. Is a call. To graciously. Surrender. Our freedom. In Christ. For the sake.

Of witness. To others. It's a call. To graciously. Surrender. Our freedom. In Christ. For the sake. Of the witness.

For others. And again. That's the point. Of James's speech. Especially in verse 21. Where he's. Very cognizant. Of the Jews. Non-believing Jews.

[35:03] That are worshiping. In synagogues. And he does not. Want to create. Such a rift. Between the Gentile believers. And these Jews. That he asks. For special sensitivity.

On these things. And so there's a wonderful principle. For us here. We can celebrate. Freedom in Christ. That does not mean. We throw off the law. We speak badly. About the law. We. Ignore the Ten Commandments.

We were just talking about this again. In our catechism classes. We are studying. The Heidelberg Catechism. And for the last. Ten or twelve weeks. I've been focusing on the Ten Commandments. And so. We are meditating. On the law of God. In our catechism classes. Because we think. That's good and right. And the scripture. Tells us to do that. And we find. No conflict. Between that.

[35:58] And what Peter says. In this passage. But we do want to graciously. Surrender our freedom.

In Christ. For the sake of witness. To others. Come back next week. Who's preaching? Daniel. Right? No. John. Thank you. John. We'll see next week.

That Paul actually. Circumcises Timothy. In the next passage. After this passage. And it's like. Well why would he do that? They. The council just declared.

It's not necessary. John will explain more of that. Next week. Well it's a beautiful passage.

It's. Very foundational. In our understanding. Of the foundational doctrine. Of Christianity. Salvation. By grace.

[36:56] Through faith. To which God. Pours out his spirit. On all who believe. And if the spirit of Christ.

Is in you. You are Christ's. Let's pray and thank God. For this good news. Heavenly Father.

We do thank you. For your grace. Your mercy. That you have lavishly. Poured out. On all who would believe. I pray that each one here today.

Will do that. That we would. Respond in faith. To the good news. Thank you for the freedom.

In Christ. Thank you for the unity. We have in Christ. Because of your spirit. Grow us. In Christ. And grow us in unity. I pray.

[37:51] In Jesus's name. Amen.