

“The Showdown at the Jerusalem Council”

Acts 15:1-35

Pastor Jarrett Stephens

I've gotta tell you, I am getting VERY excited about what I keep hearing and seeing advertisements for that is fast approaching us here in Houston. I've heard about it for a while...when I ask people about it, they tend to light up. Last year, I was NOT able to go – none of us were because it was cancelled due to Covid...I'm talking about the Houston Rodeo.

Now, something you need to know about your pastor is that growing up I went through a bunch of phases. When I got something in my mind, I went “all-in” and I went after it!

For example, I first remember wanting to be an astronaut. And so, my parents – ever the encouragers, they went out and bought me a globe. I remember learning all the planets and getting a telescope for Christmas one year. I had in my mind that I was going to be an astronaut.

And then the Challenger exploded and I was watching that on live TV when it happened...it actually happened 36 years ago this past Friday...hard to believe! I was in the second or third grade and I remember seeing that and my passion and desire to be an astronaut subsided pretty quickly! I decided that was not for me.

So, the next phase was to be an actor. And so, I enrolled in acting school – again, my parents – bless them – ever the encouragers, signed me up. I was a part of an acting troupe called...are you ready for this: *The Peter Pan Players*

And we were good too! My first role was as a fox and a page in the play, *Hansel and Gretel*. I so bad wanted to be a gingerbread man, but didn't make the cut! My first speaking lines were in the play *101 Dalmatians*. All I remember was that I was a dog named Sam, we were watching a western on TV and my line was “Go get em' boy!” – You would have been so proud...I'm' telling you I nailed it.

My biggest role ever was for the play *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*. By this time I had been in the troupe for a number of years and I scored the role of Grumpy...and I was a natural at that!

This phase ended because one day I went to baseball practice after just leaving the acting troupe and I didn't get all the make-up I was wearing off before going to practice. I remember, one of my “friends” saw me and asked me if I was wearing make-up.

As a 13 year-old, I didn't really have an answer and so of course he brought others in to make fun of me for wearing make-up and that's when I decided that acting wasn't in my future, and it was on to the next phase.

And this next phase is why you will see I am so excited about the Houston Rodeo is because that was the phase! I wanted to be a rodeo cowboy.

Now, hear me out on this. I've told you before that my parents were both from Mississippi...and so I would spend much of my summers sometimes the entire summer with my grandparents. My mom also had to brothers that lived in the same area and they had a bunch of land, some horses and a roping arena in their pasture.

So, I would watch them ride horses, rope and this phase began...and again, I went ALL IN. Give me the wranglers, I had the Justin Ropers and belt buckle and cowboy hat. I started listening to country music...heck, I even tried the snuff deal, but got sick and threw up! I was a cowboy!

Now, at this point, I think my parents had processed and wised up as it relates to fully supporting the phases I was going through because I asked for a horse so I could start rodeoing and that's kind of where they drew the line. Probably best because that phase lasted a couple of years before I dove head-first into sports, specifically football.

ALL that to say I still love watching rodeos...still own my ropes that I had growing up, and I can't wait to take in my first Houston Rodeo after eating some fried food of some kind. It's going to be awesome.

I thought of the Houston Rodeo and my cowboy phase growing up when I was reading and studying the passage we are looking at today.

Because of my "cowboy phase" I've always enjoyed watching good westerns. So, movies like Lonesome Dove and Young Guns, Tombstone even the old John Wayne films I remember my grandfather watching...I've always been into them.

And when I look at Acts 15 and what takes place here, I see it as the theological version of the "Shooutout at the O.K. Corral". I'm calling the message today: **The Showdown at the Jerusalem Council**

Now, picking up where we left off, Paul and Barnabas have just completed their first missionary journey (**SHOW MAP**).

As you recall, they go 700 miles by land, 500 miles by sea – it was an 18-24 month journey of preaching the gospel, making disciples, planting churches...they established local leadership in these churches and come back home to their sending church here in Antioch where they celebrate together all that God had done...predominately celebrating:

Acts 14:27b – "...how he (God) had opened a door of faith to the Gentiles."

This was a BIG deal. The gospel of Jesus was not just for the Jews, it was for the Gentiles, and this was underscored again and again on this first missionary journey (see Acts 13 &14). In fact, let me highlight it for you:

Early in the missionary journey, Paul and Barnabas go to Cyprus and lead the most powerful man in Cyprus – Sergius Paulus – the Roman proconsul to the Christ.

Acts 13:46-49 – (in Antioch Pisidia – show map) **“And Paul and Barnabas spoke out boldly, saying, “It was necessary that the word of God be spoken first to you. Since you thrust it aside and judge yourselves unworthy of eternal life, behold, we are turning to the Gentiles. ⁴⁷ For so the Lord has commanded us, saying, ““I have made you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring salvation to the ends of the earth.”” ⁴⁸ And when the Gentiles heard this, they began rejoicing and glorifying the word of the Lord, and as many as were appointed to eternal life believed.⁴⁹ And the word of the Lord was spreading throughout the whole region.”**

Acts 14:1 – **“Now at Iconium they entered together into the Jewish synagogue and spoke in such a way that a great number of both Jews and Greeks believed.”**

Acts 14:21-22a – **“When they had preached the gospel to that city (Derbe) and had made many disciples, they returned to Lystra and to Iconium and to Antioch,²² strengthening the souls of the disciples, encouraging them to continue in the faith...”**

So, the gospel explodes in the area of Galatia – scores of Gentiles come to know Jesus as Lord and Savior. They willingly embrace him as Lord – the church in Antioch is celebrating this and we pick up in Acts 15.

Acts 15:1 – **“But some men came down from Judea and were teaching the brothers, “Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.”**

Now, this is the crux of the issue. And that’s how I’m going to outline the passage today:

- We’re going to see the issue.
- We’re going to look at the solution they come up to resolve the issue.
- We’ll see them come to a certain conclusion.
- And then we’re going to see an action that is taken.

We’ll finish up the message giving some lessons we can learn from in this episode in scripture and some take-aways that I think will make us more effective Christians and ultimately help us become a more effective church.

1. The Issue – What the Church believes and teaches about salvation

Now, we have seen CLEARLY that the gospel of Jesus is for Gentiles. We know this NOT only from Acts 13 and 14, but even going back to Acts 10 & 11 when after Peter preaching to Cornelius and his household...they call on the name of the Lord and the Holy Spirit is given to them.

Peter reports this back to the church. He shares about this vision God had given him about not calling anything common or unclean that God has made clean – this has to do with the Gentiles. And listen to what he says regarding the Holy Spirit being given to Cornelius, a Gentile.

Acts 11:15-17 – “As I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell on them just as on us at the beginning. ¹⁶ And I remembered the word of the Lord, how he said, ‘John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.’ ¹⁷ If then God gave the same gift to them as he gave to us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could stand in God's way?”

So, we know salvation has come to the Jew and to the Gentile. It's for anyone who will call on the name of the Lord for forgiveness of sin.

However, there are some teachers that have evidently made their way from Judea (Jerusalem – the Mother Church) – this is where the apostles were...this is headquarters for the faith so to speak so whenever there was a teacher coming from this area, ears perked up...there was a sense of authority simply because of where they came from. And these teachers are teaching...look at (v. 1) again.

Acts 15:1 – “But some men came down from Judea and were teaching the brothers, “Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.”

The teaching was you are not saved...you are not brought into a right relationship with because you call on the name of the Lord, trust in Jesus – his death and resurrection by faith. But instead, you have to be marked...you have to be a part of covenant Israel (that's what circumcision was a sign of – see Gen. 17) THEN and only then will you be saved.

In other words, you have to convert to Judaism, follow the law of Moses, AND believe in Jesus – THIS is what equates to salvation!

Now, most of you can readily see WHY this is such a BIG issue! We're talking about salvation here. This is what the entire Christian faith is about:

- How is one made right with God?
- How can we be sure our sins are forgiven and that our eternal future is secure?

If we are shaky on this...if the foundation isn't sure here, we can't be sure of anything. And Paul and Barnabas...because of what they know and what they have experienced they raise a red flag on this immediately.

Acts 15:2 – “And after Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and debate (they said, no...we're with you on a lot, but NOT on this...and they weren't going to back down) with them Paul and Barnabas and some of the others were appointed to go up to Jerusalem to the apostles and the elders about this question.”

So, the issue is: Salvation – How do we know...how will we teach that one made right with God? Is it by trusting in him by faith OR do Gentiles have to convert to Judaism...be circumcised and obey the laws of Moses.

The issue is one of salvation. But we see in (v. 2):

2. The Solution – Let’s have a Showdown in Jerusalem

This is such a big issue, the decision is made by the church in Antioch to send Paul and Barnabas along with some others to go meet with the Mother Church and get to the bottom of this deal.

Now, before we read about what takes place in Jerusalem, just think about this in terms of what is at stake here:

1. What the church believes about and how the church will teach salvation.
2. Evangelism among the Gentiles is stake. Can you imagine preaching the gospel to these Gentiles and having to tag onto the invitation, “Oh, yeah, you have to be circumcised AND follow the law of Moses.” – What?! It sounded good for a second!
3. The Church could split over this. I can tell you Paul and Barnabas aren’t changing their mind. If they go to Jerusalem and the conclusion is that it is salvation PLUS conversion to Judaism – I’m telling you it would split the Church, and it should have if that was the case.

Illus. Church fights – I’ve heard about a lot of church fights through the years...fighting over the color of the carpet, over how loud the music is, over the music selection, over a leadership decision. I’ve seen a lot of church fights that have led to church splits MOST of which didn’t have to happen with a little humility and communication.

What Paul and Barnabas are dealing with here is worth a church split! A lot is at stake!

4. Paul’s apostleship in some ways is at stake. His ministry is a calling to the Gentiles. He’s been teaching and establishing churches and training leaders. If he’s wrong on the essential of salvation, then his very apostleship and spiritual authority is questioned.

So much at stake, and so the solution is, let’s go up to Jerusalem (and it’s up because it’s up in elevation) – let’s go up to Jerusalem, meet with the leaders and figure this out.

And as they go: **Acts 15:3-4** – “So, being sent on their way by the church, they passed through both Phoenicia and Samaria, describing in detail the conversion of the Gentiles, and brought great joy to all the brothers.⁴ When they came to Jerusalem, (look at this!) they were welcomed by the church and the apostles and the elders, and they declared all that God had done with them.”

I confess my title, “Showdown at the Jerusalem Council” is a little disingenuous BECAUSE there doesn’t seem to be any ill-will or anger on any side here, it was more a meeting to get some things settled and straighten some things out.

We can learn from their humility they exhibit here. We can learn from the fact that they don't run from confrontation or conflict. We'll talk about that more at the end of our time together.

They get to Jerusalem and tell about their missionary journey and how God moved and look at what happens:

Acts 15:5 – “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, we see here exactly where this teaching is coming from. It's coming from Pharisees – remember these are the teachers of the law. They knew the Mosaic Law backwards and forwards and as Pharisees, they took pride in keeping that law. And the scripture here tells us the Pharisees in this case are “believers”!

Just want to underscore here that it's possible to be a Christian and not have the correct understanding of certain doctrine. Salvation is NOT based on knowledge, it's based on faith in Christ – and once we follow Jesus and come under his word and biblical teaching we can grow in understanding of biblical doctrine.

We need to give people space to learn and grow once they come to Christ. Just because they know Jesus doesn't mean they have arrived and have a correct understanding of everything the Bible teaches – especially if they are coming from different faith backgrounds!

Sure, we can challenge them and do our best to disciple them in the truth. What I'm arguing for here though is just a little grace for people that are not as far down the road spiritually as we are!

I'm arguing for grace here for these Pharisees. Just put yourself in their position! The Jewish people for millennia had been taught that they are a covenant people and that covenant was expressed via circumcision.

It started with Abraham, and then to Moses. For two thousand years, this was the way of the Hebrew people. Jesus was Jewish. Like any God-fearing Jew was taken on the eighth day to be circumcised (Luke 2:21) and then presented in the Temple for purification according to the Law of Moses.

If circumcision was good for Abraham and for Moses and for Jesus, these believing Pharisees, just assumed that it was good for everyone! They were ready to receive Jesus as Messiah, but all that they had grown up in, all that they had been taught – for years and years and years – that's really hard to just toss out the window!

And why would they toss it out the window anyway? To them, this was really good stuff! Knowing Israel's history, celebrating the work of God in their past. Honoring him with sacrifices, tithes, offerings, festivals and holy days – what's wrong with that?!

To them, this new covenant was a renewal, NOT a doing away with the old covenant. They were wrong, but they were sincerely wrong and again, I'm just arguing for a little grace here for those that may be believers but are coming out of pasts that have a lot of baggage (and I don't mean that in a derogatory way!)

A LOT is at stake with what we are talking about as it relates to this specific issue in Acts 15, but their understanding even though it's off is understandable, right?

So, this issue comes up and they handle it in such a remarkable way. We don't see any yelling...no name calling is recorded. Nobody pouts, takes their ball and goes home that we are aware of. They come together and have what seems to be by all accounts a spirited, Spirit-led discussion and debate.

Acts 15:6-11 - “The apostles and the elders were gathered together to consider this matter. ⁷ And after there had been much debate (there was back and forth...people were given time to discuss, and push back and talk), Peter stood up (Now, everyone knows Peter...when he talks, people listen) and said to them, “Brothers, you know that in the early days God made a choice among you, that by my mouth the Gentiles should hear the word of the gospel and believe.”

Now, just a little parenthesis in the message if you will that will help shed some light on what's taking place here! Do you remember the conversation between Jesus and Peter at Caesarea Philippi when Peter confesses Jesus as the Son of God? This is just a side note here...

Matt. 16:19a – “I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven...”

Peter is the one who will unlock the door if you will for people to begin entering into the Kingdom of heaven. And he does! If you recall:

- It's Peter's preaching on Pentecost (Acts 2) where thousands are saved and given the Spirit of God – KEY!
- It's Peter's preaching (Acts 8) where Samaritans have already turned to Christ but it's only after Peter's preaching that the Spirit falls on the Samaritans.
- We've already mentioned Acts 10 & 11 with Peter's preaching and the Spirit falling on the Gentiles.

When Peter steps up to address the council, ALL of this is in his mind and heart. He has heard Paul and Barnabas and he is putting it all together what the Lord is doing.

Acts 15:8-11 – “And God, who knows the heart, (and listen: when it comes to salvation – this is the bottom line. God knows our heart! He knows who trusts in him by faith. And what is the sign that we have trusted in him) bore witness to them, by giving them the Holy Spirit just as he did to us, (Circumcision is no longer the mark of being in a relationship with God, being given the Holy Spirit is. You could say it like this! It's no longer a circumcision of the flesh that makes you right with God but a circumcision of your heart – Rom. 2:29 “circumcision is of the heart made by the Spirit!)⁹ and he made no distinction between us and them, having cleansed their hearts by faith.¹⁰ 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? (Peter says, us Jews haven't been able to keep the law, its why we needed Jesus in the first place.

If we can't do it, why should we expect the Gentiles to have to try and then he makes this statement that is just genius)¹¹ **But we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will.**"

Notice, Peter doesn't say they (the Gentiles) will be saved just as us (Jews) by belief in Christ. He switches it around and says, "let me just say, we (Jews) are saved in the same way the Gentiles are – by faith in Christ!

Listen to me: We don't add anything to salvation! This is what we are getting at here! Our doctrine of being made right with God through faith in Christ – PERIOD is being solidified right here at the Jerusalem showdown...and it's a good thing it is because it will be a core tenant of our faith – it is a fundamental of our faith...it is a hill we die on.

We are NOT saved by ANY kind of work. We are not saved by being a good person. Obeying the Bible. We are saved...brought into a right relationship with God when we believe with our heart that Jesus Christ is Lord and God raised him from the dead.

Belief in Christ (not mental ascent...a giving of your heart and life to him is what equates to salvation and the WHOLE of scripture points to this – and it's being poured in concrete here for the church in Acts 15.

If salvation includes ANY kind work, it exes out...it nullifies the grace of God.

Rom. 11:6 – "But if it is by grace, it is no longer on the basis of works; otherwise grace would no longer be grace."

Gal. 2:16, 21 – "yet we know that a person is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ, so we also have believed in Christ Jesus, in order to be justified by faith in Christ and not by works of the law, because by works of the law no one will be justified... I do not nullify the grace of God, for if righteousness were through the law, then Christ died for no purpose."

Richard C.H. Lenski (Lutheran Pastor in early 1900's. He wrote a number of N.T. commentaries) – **"To add anything to Christ as being necessary to salvation, say circumcision or any human work of any kind, is to deny that Christ is the complete Savior, is to put something human on par with Him, yes to make it the crowning point. That is fatal! A bridge to heaven that is built of 99/100 of Christ and even only 1/100 of anything human breaks down at the joint and ceases to be a bridge. Even if Christ be thought of as carrying us 999 miles of the way, and something merely human be required for the last mile, this would leave us hanging in the air with heaven being still far away."**

You can't add anything to the work of Christ accomplished on the cross and in the resurrection. His work is a finished work – "It is finished" and salvation is accomplished by grace through faith alone in Christ alone.

Now, it is VERY important to note that the Church did not decide that salvation is by grace through faith alone in Jesus – God decided that! The Church here at the showdown at the Jerusalem Council just recognized it!

Here in Acts 15, the Bible tells us that after Peter speaks (and he spoke mainly of his testimony – what he had experienced). Paul and Barnabas, they do the same (v. 12)! And after the crowd hears from Peter and Paul and Barnabas relaying their experiences with the Gentiles coming to know Jesus.

James, the half-brother of Jesus stands up. His is an interesting story. He was the half-brother of Jesus that didn't believe in Jesus until after the resurrection.

He becomes a leader in the early church...he's actually referred to as a pillar in the church (Gal. 2:9). He had a great nickname!

Illus. Nicknames – Jlynn, SuperJarrettLynn, Steetburger, Leno (chin)

Christian history, legend tells us he became such a prayer warrior that his nickname was “Camel knees” because he spent so much time in prayer, his knees were like that of camel.

Well, James takes his turn to speak and you can read in (v. 13-17) – he doesn't relay his experience with the Gentiles coming to know Jesus and being given the Spirit of God, you know what he does?

He relays the Old Testament scripture! He goes to the sacred writing...he goes to the Bible if you will and he simply quotes a prophecy from Amos showing his Jewish brothers that God calling Gentiles to himself has always been in the plans of God and this was prophesied years beforehand!

We've got:

1. The Issue – What's the church going to believe and teach about salvation.
2. The Solution – It's a showdown at the Jerusalem Council
3. **The Conclusion: Salvation is by grace alone but be sensitive to others**

Acts 15:19-21 – “Therefore my judgment is that we should not trouble (“trouble” means to “stir up” or “create fear”) those of the Gentiles who turn to God,²⁰ but should write to them to abstain from the things polluted by idols, and from sexual immorality, and from what has been strangled, and from blood.²¹ For from ancient generations Moses has had in every city those who proclaim him, for he is read every Sabbath in the synagogues.”

The conclusion was, “Look, this is settled...from experience and scripture we know that God has granted salvation to the Gentiles. They don't have to do anything for salvation. It's by grace through faith in Jesus – PERIOD.

However, what James and the elders want to reinforce is a sensitivity on the Gentiles part to not do anything that would sacrifice fellowship and unity with the Jewish believers who are saved.

The call is to think BIG PICTURE. God is making something new here called the church. And it's no longer Jew and no longer Gentile, but they are one in Christ. But, as we mentioned previously, there is a lot of baggage on both sides.

The Gentile people have a lot of sensual baggage...they were of the world. Eat, drink and be merry. Live it up today! Make sure your needs are met – ALL of them, no matter how! This is what they carried into their relationship with Jesus.

And the Jewish people? Well, they had religious baggage. And what the council concludes is we recognize Gentiles that you don't have to do anything in order to be saved, but because you are saved, be sensitive to your Jewish neighbors and friends.

Don't participate in activities (eating food dedicated to idols, sexual immorality, not straining the blood from food your eating – this was so offensive to Jewish people) – the call is just consider others and don't do these things that would automatically cause Jewish people to write you off or not want to fellowship with you.

It's a call to give grace and live in unity. And so, finally, they take an action here:

4. The Action – Write a letter to the churches educating and informing them on the decision.

This is what (v. 22-30) is all about. They send this letter along with a few men from the church in Jerusalem to go back to Antioch and the surrounding area and if you read, you will see the churches are strengthened and encouraged.

Really cool to see the Church tested and come through healthy and strong. Now, just a few lessons and takeaways to close with:

1. There are hills to die on in the church, but they are few and far between.

There's an old Protestant Motto that goes like this: "In essentials unity, in non-essentials liberty, in all things charity.

Yes, there is truth...and we don't back away from truth. We stand and speak where the Bible speaks. This is our authority. And some places it speaks, it's black and white – there is no wiggle-room.

- The Bible is God's word.
- Jesus was born of a virgin.
- He is the son of the living God.
- He lived a perfect, sinless life.
- Died on a cross as a substitute for me and you.
- Was physically resurrected, physically ascended and is physically coming again.
- His Church is his Bride.

These are non-negotiables...we'll break fellowship if you start teaching something different or adding to/taking away from one of these doctrines. These are the hills to die on!

But what our Methodist and Presbyterian brothers and sisters believe about baptism, or what our more charismatic brothers and sisters believe about the Spirit, we don't have to agree on all those things, AND we don't have to break fellowship over it either! We don't allow our preferences trump love!

And look...when it comes to even smaller issues of preference...mere opinions that have nothing to do with doctrine like how we do worship...what color the carpet is...whether or not we do this program or embrace this specific ministry – These aren't hills to die on and so let's give one another grace and operate in a spirit of humility.

2. Conflict is inevitable. Use it as an opportunity for growth.

Look, in a church with different people from all different walks of life and backgrounds and experiences, there will be conflict. But let's be like this early church and come together – again, in a spirit of humility and grace and let's talk about it!

At the Jerusalem Council, there was a spirited debate...there was a back and forth...there was a listening and sharing of viewpoints, but it was done in love and a striving toward unity!

I'm so glad that Paul and Barnabas didn't sweep what they were thinking and believing under the rug. I'm so glad they didn't let false teaching go just because they wanted to avoid conflict! Instead, they addressed it!

Conflict is inevitable. Here at church. In your home (think about this as it relates to your marriage). At the workplace.

Use conflict as an opportunity for growth. Confront the conflict head on. Don't run from it, avoid it or fear it. Address it swiftly and boldly, just make sure you are doing so with empathy and compassion.

3. Be willing to surrender freedoms for the sake of the advance of the gospel.

The conclusion this council came to was, let's not do anything that would prevent someone from moving forward in their relationship with the Lord OR from coming to know the Lord.

As Christians, we don't use our freedom to indulge in what we want to (Gal. 5:13) but instead we look out for others.

The main purpose of our life is to point people to Jesus and if ANYTHING takes away from that, even if it's permissible by scripture, we should take a step back and really ask the Holy Spirit to lead and guide us before moving forward.

I love the heart for unity...the desire to put others above our own wants and needs that is displayed in this chapter. So much to learn from the Showdown at the Jerusalem Council. But that's enough for today.

Will you pray with me?

Please Note: This document is not meant to be a published, cited, annotated research paper. It is simply a transcript of a spoken message, provided as a resource. Many commentaries, articles, and other sermon helps were likely studied and contributed to the forming of this message.