

Sermon outline and notes © Dr. Stephen Felker, Pastor
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18510 Branders Bridge Rd., Colonial Heights, VA 23834
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Acts 15:1-18 (read vv.1-12) “How We are Saved”

Intro. There is an unconquered disease that has become greatly feared by many people. That disease is called AIDS. You don't hear as much about it today, but about 37 million people worldwide are infected with the disease. It is a terrible disease. Yet one good that can come from it is to show us one of the greatest illustrations of what the spiritual disease of sin is like. Often people have the HIV virus and do not know it for months or years. Even so, many people have the spiritual disease of sin, and yet they seem to act as though the problem doesn't exist. Furthermore, the HIV virus is a slow death like sin. It is gradual, taking years to bring about death. Even so, our sin problem usually does not bring about immediate death. It usually takes years for the full sentence of death to be carried out. That is why many people have little concern for the salvation from sin that God offers.

What a different picture it would be if you were to fall off a cliff while hiking and soon catch a small tree, only to see the roots begin to break away from the earth. At any moment you could plunge to your death. Oh, how quickly you would cry out, “Someone save me, someone save me!” Immediate danger brings an immediate desire for salvation. Well, the danger of sin is just as real, and the consequences of sin are greater. I believe that more people would seek salvation if the consequences of sin were more immediate. But you never know how long you have to live. Drew and I have preached the funerals of a half dozen people who have died before the age of 25. If you are not yet saved, I advise you not to gamble with your soul. Without Jesus Christ you are walking a tightrope over hell. You just don't know how long you can avoid plunging into that God-forsaken place. So everyone needs to be saved from sin, and I encourage you to consider the urgency of being saved.

Now this morning, we are going to answer the questions, “How is a person saved from sin?” and “How can we be forgiven?” Down through the years people have debated the answer to those questions. All other religions teach that you obtain eternal life and salvation by your works. They may say that you must follow certain religious practices and ceremonies. Or some believe that you must try to be a good person. Or they may say that you must keep the 10 Commandments and other moral laws to a high degree to be saved. Even some so-called Christian denominations teach that salvation is by works. They may say that salvation is made possible by the death of Christ on the cross, but they insisted that we *receive* salvation by our works. It seems to be human nature that we want to have a part in earning our salvation.

The early church debated this same issue. Some of the Jews came to Antioch and the churches that Paul founded in Galatia and taught that a Gentile must become a Jewish convert and agree to obey Jewish law before they could be saved from sin. They said that faith in Christ was not enough. So as v.2 says, there was “no small dissension” between Paul and these other Jews. They had a heated debate. Paul strongly denied that these Gentile believers had to keep the Jewish law in order to be saved, including the law of circumcision. Who was right? Well, the leaders of the early church met in Jerusalem to settle this important issue, including Paul and Barnabas, who traveled all the way from Antioch in Syria for the sake of the gospel. As a result, we have the answer to the question of how a person is saved here in Acts 15. The theological

controversy was not swept under the rug and allowed to simmer; it was brought into the open and fearlessly discussed.

Now this is very important. The vast majority of people believe that salvation is by works. So if you are not yet a Christian, you need to know the true way of salvation. If you are already a believer, I hope you will be better equipped by this message to share the true way of salvation, which is salvation by God's grace through faith. You need to be able to defend your beliefs with people who believe otherwise.

This morning, we will see two primary ways that God has affirmed this way of salvation. So as we seek for answers, I want to share first of all that:

I. GOD HAS SHOWN HOW TO BE SAVED THROUGH HIS APOSTLES

Several of the leading apostles weighed in on this discussion. Let's see first of all:

A. The Testimony of Peter – Peter was the first apostle to speak to this issue.¹ He was a missionary at this point in time but came to Jerusalem, probably for this important discussion. About ten years before this gathering, Peter had an important experience with a Gentile named Cornelius. He said in v.7, “Men and brethren, you know that a good while ago God chose among us, that by my mouth the Gentiles should hear the word of the gospel and believe.” Do you remember the story in chapter 10 of Peter sharing the Gospel with Cornelius and his family and friends? Well Peter's experience with sharing the Gospel with these Gentiles taught the early church some important lessons. From this incident, Peter concluded:

1. Salvation Is Inward, not Outward – In vv.8-9 we read, “So God, who knows the heart, acknowledged them by giving them the Holy Spirit, just as He did to us, and made no distinction between us and them...” God made no distinction between Jewish flesh and Gentile flesh. The fact that Cornelius was an uncircumcised Gentile made no difference with God. That's because God looks at your heart. You may have tattoos on your flesh, and people notice that, but God looks at the heart. He makes also no distinction between white or black or any other skin color. What matters to Him is not the color of your skin or your ethnic background, but the condition of your heart.

This was the problem with the Pharisees. In Mt. 23 Jesus rebuked them for concentrating their attention upon outward righteousness rather than inward righteousness. He said they were like white-washed sepulchers, which look nice on the outside, but inwardly are full of corruption and dead men's bones. The Jews also thought that they were saved and right with God simply because they were sons of Abraham (Mt. 3:9).

Salvation is not a matter of trying to act and look like a Christian. You can join the church, be baptized, attend church every Sunday and even outwardly do things Christians do. But that in itself is not going to make you a Christian. Even if every one of your ancestors back for five generations or more were Christians, that does not make you one. Jesus said in John 3, “that which is born of flesh is flesh.” What matters is whether you have been born of the Spirit. God is not looking at the outside; He's looking at your heart.

God looks past what people see, and He sees the heart. What does He see when He looks at your heart? Does he see a repentant heart? Does He see faith in Christ, or faith in yourself?

¹ If this council met after the humiliating confrontation in Antioch where Peter was publicly rebuked by the younger Paul (Gal. 2:11-21), as we think it did, it is indeed creditable that Peter should be the first to get up and speak on behalf of Paul's side in the controversy (Fernando).

You can fool the pastor, but you can't fool God. True salvation is first a change of heart, and a new spirit within. Then, it should lead to an outward change. But we must not reverse the order.

Peter also concluded that:

2. Salvation Is by Grace through Faith Alone - One of the hardest things for these poor minds of ours to grasp is the freeness of God's salvation. Peter indicates here that salvation comes not by the Law at all. In v.10 Peter acknowledged that no one is able to live by the law. He said, "Now therefore, why do you test God by putting a yoke on the neck of the disciples which neither our fathers nor we were able to bear?" Therefore, we cannot be saved by the law. We cannot measure up to God's standard. The law of God does not save us; it condemns us!

So how are we saved? It is by an entirely different means. In v.11 Peter clearly stated, "But we believe that through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ we shall be saved..." Grace is favor freely bestowed. Salvation is called a gift of God in Rom. 6:23 and Eph. 2:8. So we do not receive God's salvation upon the condition of our works. It is a gift. Now God's grace is what makes salvation possible, but it is received by faith. In v.9 Peter said that God purified the hearts of the Gentiles "by faith." It is not head belief but heart belief. Salvation is received by wholly relying upon Christ, and what He did at Calvary to pay for your sins. Salvation is a gift that is received by faith, and faith alone, apart from works.

Notice also that at the end of v.11 Peter says that we Jews "are saved ... the same way they are," that is the Gentiles. This implies that no Mosaic ritual is needed for the salvation of the Jews either. Whether Jew or Gentile, we are all saved by God's grace, and not by works.

Now do you need proof that salvation is by grace through faith? Well look at the experience of Cornelius. Peter shared the gospel and the moment Cornelius believed, the Holy Spirit was given to him. There was no prior instruction given about receiving the Spirit. The Spirit just fell on them most unexpectedly "while Peter was still speaking" (10:44). To make it clear that he was saved, the Spirit's coming upon Cornelius was accompanied by obvious signs, such as speaking with tongues. Now Rom. 8:9 indicates that you are not a Christian unless you are indwelt by the Holy Spirit. The fact that Cornelius received the Holy Spirit is clear evidence that He was indeed saved. Yet, notice that he was saved without:

a) Circumcision - He was a Gentile and he was not a Jewish proselyte. He did not fully follow the Law of Moses, such as circumcision and the dietary laws.

b) Confession of faith and baptism - Cornelius and his household had not even made an oral confession of faith when the Holy Spirit came upon them, but God, who reads the heart of man, saw the faith within them. This is good evidence to use against those who say you have to be baptized to be saved.

c) Lord's Supper or other so called "Sacraments" – Clearly, none of these are required for salvation.

d) Church Membership – He had no connection with a church at this time. He attended the synagogue, if anything. It is only later that he would have joined a church.

So the conclusion is this, why should further conditions now be imposed on the Gentiles which God Himself plainly did not require? Peter's argument was difficult to answer, as it was an appeal to the acknowledged action of God, who took the initiative to grant salvation to the Gentiles. So to impose such things on Gentile believers in the present situation would be to "put God to the test," and invite His judgment. It would be to question God's right to receive the Caesarean Gentiles as He had done. Peter thus demonstrated to a certainty that God accepted Gentiles on the ground of pure grace, altogether apart from the works of the law. With this

speech Peter bows out of the book of Acts. It is significant that Luke portrays the affirmation of the mission to the Gentiles as Peter's last work.

The Bible teaches that testimony is to be established by the mouth of two or three witnesses. So we have more testimony in this text to salvation by grace through faith alone. Here we read about:

B. Miraculous Signs through Paul and Barnabas - What happened with Cornelius was not an isolated incident. In v.12 we read, "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." It was important for Barnabas and Paul to emphasize how God had endorsed their work among the Gentiles by "signs and wonders," showing that He approved of their ministry as well as of Peter's at Caesarea. Paul preached the simple gospel of Jesus dying for sinners on the cross, and whoever believes on Him can be saved. God worked mightily through that Gospel and multitudes were saved. Miracles of healing and other signs were performed. In Paul's case the Gentile converts were not being circumcised, and yet God worked mightily through Paul and Barnabas.

So God has clearly shown us that we are saved by His grace through faith alone.

C. Today, through Changed Lives - I believe that Paul brought some Gentile converts with him to the Jerusalem council. He could present living examples of how God had changed ungodly Gentiles into holy men by His grace. The same is true today! Lives are still being changed by the gospel of God's grace, as people repent and believe in Jesus and are indwelt by the Holy Spirit.

After Peter, Paul, and Barnabas completed their testimony, v.13 says that they held their peace. How could they argue against them? But that is not all, for James sums it all up by saying:

II. GOD HAS TOLD HOW TO BE SAVED THROUGH HIS WORD

James, who at this time had become the leader of the Jerusalem church,² stood to give his thoughts on this matter. This was not James the apostle, who had been martyred (Acts 12:2). Instead, it was James the half-brother of Jesus. Since he did not have much personal experience with Gentile conversion, he needed to turn to some other authority. He quoted specifically Amos 9:11-12 as Scriptural proof that it had been God's purpose through the ages to call out the Gentiles to salvation. Look at vv. 16-17 of our text, "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." That prophecy says nothing about the Gentiles becoming Jews first.

Now I want to digress just a bit. Notice that James appealed to the Word of God as the standard by which we settle disputes. While the experiences of Peter, Paul and Barnabas were important, God's Word should be our authority in faith and practice. That is what we Baptists believe. We believe in going by the Book. We believe that the inspired Word of God is better than human opinion, and religious experiences must be validated by God's Word. So we need to

² Paul mentions him first when listing the three pillars of the Jerusalem church, the others mentioned being Peter and John (Gal. 2:9).

follow the example of the early church in this regard. And where Scripture is silent we certainly should not quarrel over differences of opinion or personal convictions.

Now based on Scripture, James concluded the following:

A. Salvation Is Individual, not Collective - Note that according to v.14 God is saving people “out of” the Gentiles. All Jews are not saved (Mt. 8:11-12; Rom. 2:28-29), and all Gentiles are not saved. Not everyone who hears the gospel believes the gospel. Only those who accept the offer of salvation by faith are saved. In fact, the word translated “church” literally means, “the called-out ones.” We have been called out from among unbelievers to form an assembly of believers in Jesus Christ. God expects us to live a different life of the world.

Are you one who has heard God’s call of salvation and responded? It is an individual decision. You cannot be saved on the coattails of your mother or grandparents, or because you belong to a certain group. Just because your parents had you christened as a baby, that does not mean you are saved. You must make a personal decision of repentance and faith in Christ.

B. Salvation Is for All – In v.17 we read, “So that the rest of mankind may seek the LORD, even all the Gentiles who are called by My name....” It has always been in the plan of God to save all people, not just Jews. In Genesis 12 God chose Abraham and his seed, not to save them alone, but as He said in v.3, “in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.” Why is this the case?

1. Sin Is a Universal Problem - There is no difference in how a Jew or Gentile is saved, because we all have a common sin problem. Rom. 3:22-23 says, “...For there is no difference; for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” In Gal. 3:22 Paul wrote, “But the Scripture has confined all under sin, that the promise by faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe.” The only difference between one person and the next is the depth of sin. The only difference between one AIDS patient and another is the progression of the disease, not the ultimate result of the disease. Since the problem of sin is universal, then the offer of salvation should be universal, and in fact *is* universal. John 3:16 says, “that whoever believe in Him... shall have everlasting life.”

2. Christ Is the Universal Provision – Rom. 10:12-13 says, “For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek, for the same Lord over all is rich to all who call upon Him. For ‘whoever calls on the name of the LORD shall be saved.’” 2 Cor. 5:15 says that Christ “died for all.” 1 Tim. 2:6 says that Christ “gave Himself a ransom for all.” The Jerusalem Council had to decide if Christianity would just be a Jewish sect or a faith for all men. Thankfully they decided that God intended for salvation to be offered to all people.

And so James and apostles agreed that all people need to be saved, and they can be saved by God’s grace as we put our faith in Jesus Christ.

Conclusion: Long ago Evangelist A. H. Stewart told how, when he was greatly concerned about his soul, he was told to believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and trust Him as Savior; but he thought that way was far too easy. So he went about it according to his own idea—he joined a church, sang in the choir, and became quite a worker in the church. He hoped in all these things to obtain peace with God, but there was no peace! One day, while he was reading in his Bible the parable of the sower, he came to the words, “Then the devil comes and takes away the word out of their hearts, lest they should believe and be saved” (Luke 8:12). Stewart threw down his Bible and

said, “Will you look at that! Even the devil knows a man will be saved if he will believe!” And that day he settled it and turned to Christ and trusted Him as Savior. (Ironsides, pp.352-353).

The Bible warns of false teachers who say that faith in Christ is not enough. They say you must belong to their organization, and do what they tell you to do. In other words, man says “do”, but God says, “Done.” The work of Jesus on our behalf is complete. If you want to be saved, the door of faith is open for you and anyone else. There is only one door to salvation. Walk through that door.

Appeal: If you believe that you are a Christian, I want to ask you, “*How* were you saved?” If you were to die and stand at the gates of heaven, and God asked you, “Why should I let you into heaven?” What would you say? Would you say, “I was baptized and joined the church”? Would you talk about your good works, or how well you have kept the 10 Commandments? Well if you believe you were “saved” by any other way than faith in Christ, and the free gift of salvation, then you need to be saved God’s way. Will you do it today?

Sources: F.F. Bruce, *The New International Commentary on the New Testament: The Book of the Acts* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1954); H. Leo Eddleman, *An Exegetical and Practical Commentary on Acts* (Dallas: Books of Life Publishers, 1974); Ajith Fernando, *The NIV Application Commentary: Acts* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998); Everett F. Harrison, *Acts: The Expanding Church* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1975); H.A. Ironsides, *Lectures on the Book of Acts* (Neptune, NJ: Loizeaux Brothers 1943); Alexander Maclaren, *Expositions of Holy Scripture*, Vol. 11 (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1977 reprint); J. Vernon McGee, *Thru The Bible*, Vol. 4 (Pasadena, CA: Thru The Bible Radio, 1983); Larry Pierce, *Online Bible* [CD-ROM] (Ontario: Timnathserah Inc., 1996); Curtis Vaughan, *Acts: A Study Guide Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1977); Dr. Jerry Vines (notes from his sermon on this text). Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from *The New King James Version* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1982).

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