

## Is Grace Enough? Acts 15:1-18

**Main Point:** *Through Jesus, the promised-grace of God is actively and sufficiently providing salvation to anyone anywhere who calls on His name.*

**Introduction:** Good morning! Please open your bibles to Acts 15. If you are new to the Bible, you can find Acts 15 following the gospel accounts (Matthew, Mark, Luke, John)...

### **Orienting the Text: Where we are in the story**

A brief reminder on where we are in the story of Acts so far. After the Lord Jesus is resurrected back to life, He appears to His disciples and other followers for 40 days, teaching them about the kingdom of God. They ask the burning question that any faithful first century Jew would ask (one that many are still asking today): is now the time that you are restoring the kingdom to Israel? Jesus answers the question by redirecting them to the wider purposes God has for them: they will receive power of the promised Holy Spirit, and when they do, they will be witnesses of Jesus's kingship for not only Israel, but for Samaritans, and eventually the ends of the earth (Gentile people).

And so Luke has taken us on a geographical journey, from Jerusalem, to Judea, to Samaria (Philip), and now to Gentiles. What began with the conversion of a single Gentile under Peter (Cornelius) has now become a full blown mission with the church in Antioch, and the sending out of Paul & Barnabas. Paul & Barnabas have just completed their first major missionary journey and returned to Antioch for a time of rest and spiritual refreshment.

### *Intro to church controversy*

However, during this they are summoned to Jerusalem to meet with Peter, John, James, and other key leaders concerning what becomes the major issue in the early church. Every generation has its key issue: Christology (is Jesus divine?), Trinity (are Jesus and the Spirit co-equal with God?); Reformation: what is a true church? What is salvation? In our century, there has been battle over the Bible (is it true?), creation (did God create?). Today, the battle-line is over sexuality and gender. Well, in the first century it was over: circumcision!

Do Gentile converts have to be circumcised and follow the law of Moses in order to fully participate in God's family? As we will see this question is partly about membership; but only partially! The reason this issue becomes so contentious in the first century is because it was ultimately an issue of salvation – have the Gentiles really been delivered from the power of sin, and made co-heirs until eternal life?

At first glance, this issue may seem to be very non-consequential for us in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Circumcision today is a choice parents of newborns can make, and its largely related to potential health concerns. However, underlying the question over circumcision is a larger question looming – one that is absolutely essential to biblical faith. And it's this: *is God's grace enough to bring salvation to human beings?* Is faith in Jesus – the way we access this grace - enough to make us full-fledged members and participants in the kingdom of God? Or is there something more that we as human beings need to add to the grace of God in order to help make it sufficient? Lets turn to Acts 15 and see how they answered this question...

### **Exposition of Acts 15:1-18:**

Refresh from last week: Paul and Barnabas return from their mission trip.

Acts 14:24-28 - *Controversy erupts in the Jerusalem/Antioch churches*

Acts 15:1-6 - Let's pause here for just a moment and ask the question that might be on some of your minds: why was this such a big deal to these Jewish-Christians (ex-Pharisees?). On my reading of the text, we have two issues going on. One is theological; the other is emotional/cultural. Lets address each in turn. First the issue of *identity*:

*The identity issue*

What's at stake here? I suggest that the key theological question here is: How does one become a member of the covenant community? According to the Law of Moses, circumcision is the identity-marker that one belongs to the Abrahamic family (Israel) and thereby is a recipient of the blessings attached to it – which, in a word, would be salvation. Now, in Deuteronomy, the promise attached to obedience to the law is *life*. The goal of the Law was to show the people how to live in a way that pleases God and guarantees their “life” before Him (i.e. in His presence, which is what “salvation” is ultimately about). It all begins with circumcision as the identity marker that one belongs to this family and thus receives the guaranteed blessings promised in the the covenant. Now, these Jewish Christians weren't denying Christ per se, but rather saying, “Faith in Jesus must be accompanied by obedience to the law of Moses if one is to experience the fullness of salvation and live as Christ-pleasing member of God's family.”

Along with questions about identity, are emotional/cultural issues...

*The emotional/cultural issue*

Remember: these ex-Pharisees were used to being well-respected leaders and influencers in their community. Well, now they have to follow the leadership of fisherman/laborers, a former-zealot, former-tax collector, and this rag-tag group that Jesus called together. Now, they have Barnabas – good guy, but a nobody – and Paul, former Pharisee like them but has totally gone the other direction by insisting that the Jewish law is no longer relevant for these Gentile converts. And it's all just too much. So they fear not only a loss of identity, but also of power and influence. Now, make no mistake about it: the loss is real! But what we see here is what happens when one group puts their identity in something other than Christ. This is the kind of stuff that fractures churches, denominations, and even families – when one prizes their own traditions and emotional attachments to how things used to be over the new identity they have in Christ.

However, Peter responds and takes the conversation to a whole different level, and says that this is not about the loss of Jewish-identity, or culture; instead, this whole issue of Gentile-inclusion and the place of circumcision/law is really about the sufficiency of God's grace as given to us in Jesus Christ. Is God's grace in Jesus Christ really enough to save Gentile sinner/idolaters from the power of sin and usher them into the kingdom of God as full-fledged members of the new covenant family?

Lets listen to what Peter says: Acts 15:6-11

Peter says that these Jewish Christian leaders who were holding on to the Law were forgetting that the Law never delivered the people of Israel from their bondage to sin; in fact, it did the exact opposite! Remember Israel's history in the Old Testament: what did the law do for them? It only served to point out how glaring their disobedience to God actually was. Not because the Law itself was wrong or sinful or evil; but because their hearts were wrong, sinful, and evil. You see the only real power the law possesses is to point out the contrast between what God intends and how far short human beings fall. Paul says this throughout the New Testament doesn't he? Furthermore, Paul's letter to the Galatians, for example, we find that the law was never intended to be the be-all end-all, but was actually a precursor to Christ, and was preparation for the coming of the Messiah. Since Jesus has now fulfilled the law, and removed the barrier between us and God, we have been brought us back into a relationship with Him. Therefore, there is no distinction between Jew and Gentile, for we are all consigned to sin under the Law's power. So all are equally in need of what only God can supply! At the same time, since all are equally needy, all are also equally save-able by the all-sufficient grace of Jesus the savior! So then Peter asks a rhetorical question: why would we put another yoke around their necks when we ourselves could not even carry it? Instead, Peter asserts, God will save the Gentiles by the same grace that He saved them (Jewish Christians).

Now watch what happens next... Acts 15:12 - Paul and Barnabas testify to the wonders of God's grace working in the Gentile cities they had been ministering in, as Gentiles have been turning to faith in Christ, being filled with the Spirit, and loving Him – all apart from being circumcised and following the law of Moses.

Now, at this point, James (the Just), the leader of the Jerusalem church who also happened to be the blood half-brother of Jesus, comes forth to offer an important word. Here is one of the most significant and important statements in the New Testament concerning the shape which God's grace takes both in the book of Acts (early church) and our day today.

Acts 15:13-18 - What James says here is that what these Gentiles are experiencing is the promised-grace which the prophets had previously spoken of. So, we have a lot to unpack here. First of all, why does everyone turn and listen to James? Some say he is out of line, and speaking out of pride; some have even called him a "little pope." I had one professor even tell me that James instructions here shouldn't be considered authoritative for Christians today. Now, I don't agree with that statement at all. In my estimation, we have James speaking with moral and spiritual authority as the key leader in the Jerusalem church. For whatever reason, his voice carried weight with many of these Jewish Christians and with the assembly. Again, we don't know exactly why, but only that it did. I'm sure many of you have been in church meetings that go back and forth on whatever issue or decision – and then all of a sudden one of the elder statesman of the church stands up; someone whom the congregation respects and loves, who has proven their worth by years of faithfulness to Jesus and who walks in wisdom, and they speak their mind on the issue, and all of a sudden the issue is resolved. We had a situation in my previous church where there was a congregational meeting gone bad, with someone basically trying to hijack a vote for a staff member. The atmosphere was super tense and no one knew quite what to do; and one of our elder statesman was sitting behind me and I whispered to him, "Would you please say something?" And he looks at me blankly and goes, "I don't know what to say!" And I said, "I think the congregation needs to hear from someone they trust – would you please speak to the issue!" And he got up and started speaking – and guess what? – immediately, the room got quiet, the tension eased, and we were able to get on with the meeting. Why? Because someone with moral and spiritual authority spoke truth and wisdom into a tense situation, and the people came back together (Cameroon example too).

But what exactly did James say that was so consequential? Lets look back at this passage. Notice how James connects the testimony given by Peter with the prophecy of scripture. He says, "What Peter is talking about with the Gentiles coming to faith lines up perfectly with what God promised to do in this generation!" And what exactly is that? The text James quotes comes from the prophet Amos. The key to the prophecy is that the temple of David and his kingdom would one day be restored, and that in doing so the nations (Gentiles) would come to seek the Lord and become His own. Notice how James introduces the text he quotes: "all the prophets agree..." In other words, James indicates that with this text, he is actually summarizing the future work of God. So lets break this down:

#### *The Promised-Grace of the Prophets*

- a) Yahweh returns to rule as king, which leads to...
- b) The rebuilding of the Temple, which leads to...
- c) The restoration of the Davidic kingdom under a Messiah, which leads to...
- d) The Gentile nations seeking the Lord, which leads to...
- e) And becoming members of the covenant family (called by His name)

Now, here is the irony: James indicates that this phenomena is happening in the present moment through Jesus Christ. Look at this:

#### *How God's Promised-Grace becomes a present reality through Jesus*

- a) YHWH returns to rule as king *through Jesus*
- b) The temple is (being) rebuilt (as the world-wide church) *through Jesus*
- c) The Davidic kingdom is being restored as a worldwide fellowship *under Jesus*
- d) The Gentiles are seeking the Lord *through Jesus*
- e) And becoming members of the (new) covenant family *through Jesus*

This, my friends, is the surprising work of God, fulfilling ancient prophecies, and yet doing so in a way that no one expected or foresaw. And He is doing it all as a work of grace – apart from human aid, effort, institution, or ethnic identity. You see this was God’s plan even from the beginning: to do a miraculous work in establishing the nation of Israel, and through this nation, to bring about the promised blessing for all the families of the earth. And how did God do it? By a physical temple, a human king, and making all the Gentiles into circumcised, Jewish proselytes? No – instead God did it by raising His own Son from death, establishing His heavenly throne over the earth, and drawing all nations to Himself by giving them His Spirit, circumcising their hearts and thus causing them to worship Him not only in the land of Israel, but also in every land throughout the earth!

### **Main Point:**

*Through Jesus, the promised-grace of God is actively and sufficiently providing salvation to anyone anywhere who calls on His name*

### **Application: Personalizing God’s All-Sufficient Grace**

So how might this text be applied to us today? I want to suggest a few ways:

#### 1) Promised-Grace is still available today

What God was doing then, He is still doing today! He is still expressing His reign through the Lord Jesus, building His church, expanding His kingdom, and causing the nations to seek after Him, and making them full-fledged members of His family. Many of you here today can testify to this fact (as can I!). The reason we open the bible here each week and talk about the Living Jesus Christ is because of this!

#### 2) Promised-Grace is still sufficient today

The same way God saved human beings in the first century is the same way He is doing it in the 21<sup>st</sup> century: by His grace, and not by our own works. We don’t bring anything to the table other than our desperate need. And friends, this is exactly how God designed things to work: we have the need, He has the supply. We have the need, and He has the supply. We have the sickness, and He has the remedy; we have the disease, and He has the cure. And guess what? He loves to give the cure! God is the ultimate cheerful giver. Let me give one example from the Old Testament (Psalm 50:12-15):

*<sup>12</sup> “If I were hungry, I would not tell you, for the world and its fullness are mine. <sup>13</sup> Do I eat the flesh of bulls or drink the blood of goats?<sup>14</sup> Offer to God a sacrifice of thanksgiving, and perform your vows to the Most High, <sup>15</sup> and call upon me in the day of trouble; I will deliver you, and you shall glorify me.”*

In other words, the Psalmist is saying: this is how it works! You don’t do something for me; instead I do something for you, and in return, you rejoice and glory in my all-sufficient and gracious provision. Listen to these words from Isaiah 45:

*And there is no other god besides me, a righteous God and a Savior; there is none besides me. <sup>22</sup> “Turn to me and be saved, all the ends of the earth! For I am God, and there is no other. <sup>23</sup> By myself I have sworn; from my mouth has gone out in righteousness a word that shall not return: ‘To me every knee shall bow, every tongue shall swear allegiance.’*

In other words, the prophet is saying: I am the savior; the willing savior! Turn to me, all the ends of the earth, and be saved! I am God, there is no other, and to me, every knee will bow and tongue shall swear allegiance.

#### 3) Is Promised-Grace enough for you today?

Is God’s promised-grace, now available in the present day through Jesus, the King, the Messiah, is it enough for you? Now, of course the obvious answer is: well, yes! Who would deny that? But think about how much God’s

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grace is denied today by human institutions – religious institutions – that continue to put the yoke of bondage on the necks of people and tell them, “Jesus is not enough – you must do X, Y, and Z to really be a member of God’s family...” Now, don’t misunderstand me: there are things to do in the Christian life. Following Jesus is an active thing, which calls for obedience, devotion, and – well, let’s face it – the hard work of loving people and fighting our sin and displaying more of the fruit of the Spirit in our lives!

But that’s not what gets us to grace – what gets us to promised-grace is simply our deep need and His great generosity. And what keeps us going in promised-grace is not our own efforts (as important as they are!), but the all-sufficiency of His promised-grace which continually refines and transforms our lives. But so many Christians today fail to grasp the depth of this good news, and live their lives with a dark cloud of despair and condemnation as it were over their heads. Friends, it should not be so! The good news of promised-grace now being presently available should lead to exactly what we see here in Acts: rejoicing in the work of God in Christ, ongoing filling of the Holy Spirit (our supplier) so that we can more readily obey and love our great King. Again, He is the supplier – we are the recipients. Do you believe today – and I’m talking to us Christians – do we believe that Jesus loves me, this I know, because the Bible tells me so? Or are we being seduced into believing that no we must bring something to the table ourselves in order for this thing to really stick?

I want to share with you briefly the story of the conversion of one of the great leaders in church history, John Wesley, the founder of Methodism. Wesley was very religious, and as a young man dedicated his life to God and to holiness. And with great vigor and zeal, he applied all his efforts into that singular focus. Well, as you can imagine, all that zeal, determination, and self-efforts eventually failed him and brought about a spiritual-crisis in his life. One night, he went to a church meeting where someone read out loud words from Martin Luther’s commentary on the book of Romans (who himself went through a dramatic discovery of God’s grace). Here is Wesley’s testimony in his own words:

*In the evening I went very unwillingly to a society in Aldersgate Street, where one was reading Luther’s preface to the Epistle to the Romans. About a quarter before nine, while he was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone, for salvation; and an assurance was given me **that He had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death.***

Wesley learned the secret: the all-sufficient grace of God. Fixing the eyes not on our own performance; our own devotion; our own ability; but on Jesus, the Savior, the supplier of the grace we need for salvation, for growth, for godliness, for everything. Yes, the Christian life requires effort – but it begins and ends and is sustained by grace, God’s grace, in Jesus, and nothing else.

(2 Peter 1:3-9): <sup>3</sup> His divine power has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of him who called us to<sup>[a]</sup> his own glory and excellence,<sup>[d]</sup> <sup>4</sup> by which he has granted to us his precious and very great promises, so that through them you may become partakers of the divine nature, having escaped from the corruption that is in the world because of sinful desire. <sup>5</sup> For this very reason, make every effort to supplement your faith with virtue,<sup>[e]</sup> and virtue with knowledge, <sup>6</sup> and knowledge with self-control, and self-control with steadfastness, and steadfastness with godliness, <sup>7</sup> and godliness with brotherly affection, and brotherly affection with love. <sup>8</sup> For if these qualities<sup>[f]</sup> are yours and are increasing, they keep you from being ineffective or unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. <sup>9</sup> For whoever lacks these qualities is so nearsighted that he is blind, having forgotten that he was cleansed from his former sins.