

# 09

## SESSION NINE

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# The Message of the Gospel

### SESSION SUMMARY

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In this session, we see how the church handled a heated disagreement about the nature of salvation for Gentiles. Were Gentiles saved by faith alone, or did they have to enter into salvation through the path of obedience to the Law first? The Jerusalem Council that was assembled to answer this critical question offers us a good example of how to handle disputes in the church and was vital in preserving the gospel message of “Christ Alone.”

### SCRIPTURE

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Acts 15:1-21

# THE POINT

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**God calls us to proclaim the message that salvation is available through faith in Christ alone, not through works.**

## INTRO/STARTER 5-10 MINUTES

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### Option 1

Faith is often a common theme in pop-culture. There are bestselling songs that tell people to “just believe,” and never give up the faith you need to follow your dreams. There are popular books that encourage their readers to just believe in themselves in order to achieve their goals in life. And there are movies that portray their main character as only needing to have faith in order to reach their destiny. However, whatever pop-culture medium is used, the common denominator is this: If you just believe in yourself enough, you’ll be able to do wonderful things.

- **Can you think of any songs, movies, or books that talk about “just believing” or “having faith”? How does their understanding of faith differ from faith in the Bible?**

It’s important to not just talk about faith in this generic sense, as if only having “faith” is important. Faith needs an object. Despite what pop-culture says, that object can’t be ourselves or our own strength. Biblical faith isn’t just about the person who believes; it’s about the Person in whom we believe. It’s not about having faith in a general sense, but trusting in Someone who is fully worthy of our faith. The object of our faith is what matters. It doesn’t matter how much you believe, if you put your faith in the wrong thing.

### Option 2

As a child, how many of you went outside to play, got a little muddy, and then were told: “You’re not coming into my house until you clean off that mess”? When it comes to the keepers of our homes, cleanliness is important. Tracking in mud from playing outside is not acceptable.

- **Did you ever get in trouble for dragging mud into the house? What happened?**
- **Why do you think keeping the mud outside of the house is such a big deal?**

Becoming a Christian is like walking into the house with the mud still on your shoes, knowing someone will help you clean them off and clean up the mess you’ve made. Jesus doesn’t ask for your heart to be clean when you come to Him—He wants to make it clean for you. Nothing you do can earn your salvation, because Jesus paid the only price required when He died on the cross for you.

# HIS STORY

15-20 MINUTES

## THE POINT

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**God calls us to proclaim the message that salvation is available through faith in Christ alone, not through works.**

## CHARACTERS

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- **Paul:** also known by his Hebrew name Saul; violent persecutor turned follower and apostle of Christ; known as the missionary to the Gentiles
- **Barnabas:** traveled with Paul during his first missionary journey

## PLOT

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Like today's church, the early church had some disputes and controversies. These were imperfect people, like us, who were trying to live out their new lives in Christ together. Our story today takes us into one of these disputes—one that touches on the very heart of the gospel—the issue of whether Jesus alone is enough to save.

## THE QUESTION OF WHETHER JESUS ALONE IS ENOUGH TO SAVE

In Acts 13–14 we saw how the early church sent the first missionaries, Paul and Barnabas, to take the gospel farther out from Jerusalem as Jesus had instructed (Acts 1:8). The trip was difficult for the two missionaries, but many had come to faith in Christ, including a number of Gentiles. News of what God had done spread, but not everyone in the church was pleased with it.

**<sup>1</sup> 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.” <sup>2</sup> And after Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and debate 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. <sup>3</sup> 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. <sup>4</sup> When they came to Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the church and the apostles and the elders, and they declared all that God had done with them. <sup>5</sup> 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.” (Acts 15:1-5)**

The dispute began when some men who evidently had heard the reports of Gentiles coming to faith in Christ came down from Judea to Antioch. These men did not deny the possibility of Gentiles being saved, but the possibility of anyone being saved apart from obedience to the Law. When the men arrived, they began to teach that circumcision was necessary for salvation.

When Paul and Barnabas heard what the men were teaching, they confronted them and argued about this matter with them. The whole debate can be boiled down to the question of whether Jesus alone is sufficient for salvation, or if something else—such as circumcision in this case—was needed in addition.

Paul and Barnabas rejected their teaching for at least two reasons. The primary reason concerned the core of the gospel—salvation by grace through faith alone (Eph. 2:8-9). The men from Judea were teaching that faith alone was not sufficient for salvation. They argued that a person first had to belong to God’s covenant community, the people of Israel, and that becoming part of God’s community required the mark of circumcision. Paul and Barnabas understood that you do not have to be part of the right people before you can be saved; anyone, anywhere can be saved the moment they trust in Jesus Christ.

### TIMELINE

**CHRIST ALONE**  
*Salvation comes by grace alone through faith in Christ alone.*

**SALVATION AVAILABLE TO ALL**  
*The message of the gospel reaches people of different backgrounds.*

**ENGAGING CULTURE**  
*Paul engages the surrounding culture with the message of Christ.*

Another reason Paul and Barnabas confronted the men from Judea might have been linked to their hearts as missionaries. Most missionaries engage people right where they are as they encourage people to consider the gospel. Requiring circumcision of the Gentiles would be an added burden and hindrance to the gospel.

When it became apparent such an important issue could not be settled in Antioch and that the debate had broad implications for the church, Paul, Barnabas, and some others were sent to Jerusalem to take the case to the elders and apostles there. As Paul and Barnabas traveled the 250 miles to Jerusalem, they stopped along the way and shared with the believers what God was doing among the Gentiles. It is no wonder those believers were excited! Not only had Jesus made it clear that His gospel was intended for all the nations, not just the Jews (Matt. 28:18-20; Acts 1:8; John 10:16), but this was also exactly what God had told Abram so many years before (Gen. 12:3).

- **What are some issues we need to defend, like Paul and Barnabas defended the Gentiles' salvation?** (p. 67, PSG)

## LETTING SCRIPTURE SETTLE THE DISPUTE

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The church leaders gathered to consider the issue in what has been called the Jerusalem Council. As we will read, settling the issue at stake was critically important, but so was the way the church would resolve it. To what would the church appeal to answer this question—tradition or God's Word and what they had seen God do around them?

**<sup>6</sup> The apostles and the elders were gathered together to consider this matter. <sup>7</sup> And after there had been much debate, Peter stood up 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. <sup>8</sup> And God, who knows the heart, bore witness to them, by giving them the Holy Spirit just as he did to us, <sup>9</sup> and he made no distinction between us and them, having cleansed their hearts by faith. <sup>10</sup> 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? <sup>11</sup> But we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will." <sup>12</sup> And all the assembly fell silent, and they listened to Barnabas and Paul as they related what signs and wonders God had done through them among the Gentiles. <sup>13</sup> After they finished speaking, James replied, "Brothers, listen to me. <sup>14</sup> Simeon has related how God first visited the Gentiles, to take from them a people for his name. <sup>15</sup> And with this the words of the prophets agree, just as it is written, <sup>16</sup> "After this I will return, and I will rebuild the tent of David that has fallen; I will rebuild its ruins, and I will restore it, <sup>17</sup> that the remnant of mankind may seek the Lord, and all the Gentiles who are called by my name, says the Lord, who makes these things <sup>18</sup> known from of old.' <sup>19</sup> Therefore my judgment is that we should not trouble those of the Gentiles who**

**turn to God,<sup>20</sup> 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.<sup>21</sup> For from ancient generations Moses has had in every city those who proclaim him, for he is read every Sabbath in the synagogues.” (Acts 15:6-21)**

Once again, the issue was debated for some time and then Peter stood to address the gathering and offered a strong defense of Gentiles being saved by grace alone apart from circumcision. Peter reminded the gathering of his experience with Cornelius (Acts 10–11) and how God had revealed Peter’s need to set aside a mindset fixed on tradition and replace it with one fixed on the gospel.

Peter then presented God’s gift of the Holy Spirit to the Gentiles as evidence of the Gentiles’ conversion apart from circumcision. God had given the Gentile believers the Holy Spirit just as He had given the Holy Spirit to them. No distinction was made based on circumcision or any other factor—everyone had been saved by faith, and the giving of the Holy Spirit confirmed that God accepted that faith.

After Peter finished, the entire assembly fell completely silent. Peter’s strong defense of the gospel resonated with the gathering. Paul and Barnabas then took the opportunity to echo Peter and share how God had worked through them to see Gentiles come to faith. Paul and Barnabas relayed story after story of how God had transformed the lives of many Gentiles.

Then it was James’ turn. He began by affirming Peter’s testimony but then he pointed the gathering to Scripture. James quoted Amos 9:11-12 to show that what they had experienced with Gentiles coming to faith was part of God’s plan all along. God had told their ancestors that everyone—Jews and Gentiles alike—would seek the Lord. The message of salvation had never been only for the Jews.

## **GOING FURTHER WITH THE STORY**

In Acts 15:22-35, a letter came back with a rebuke of the men who had raised the issue about circumcision. The council wanted the Gentile believers in Antioch to know that those men did not speak on the church’s behalf. It was clear from the greeting that the church’s ruling was in favor of the Gentile believers and that they were considered brothers and sisters in Christ. The leaders then made it clear that their decision came through the Holy Spirit’s wisdom and guidance and that no burdens should be placed upon them except for four requirements.

But why single out these four practices? James and the other leaders were concerned that the Gentile believers might take their personal freedom in Christ too far and live in such a way as to be a stumbling block to the convictions of their Jewish brothers and sisters. These four practices were addressed in Leviticus 17–18 where they were forbidden of both Jews and Gentiles living among them. These four prohibitions would not surprise the Gentiles, and they were deeply significant to the Jewish believers. If the Gentile believers abstained from these four practices, they would safeguard themselves from being a burden to the Jewish believers or other Jews coming to faith in Christ.

## **TIMELINE**

### **LIVING ON MISSION**

*Paul viewed his day-to-day work as an opportunity to spread the gospel.*

*\*Beginning in Spring 2018*

### **STANDING STRONG**

*Refuse compromise when the truth of the gospel is at stake.*

### **UNITY IN THE CROSS**

*Believers are united together in Christ.*

## 99 ESSENTIAL DOCTRINES

Justification and Works (p. 68, PSG)

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*Justification is not the result of human effort or good works; it comes through faith in the righteousness of Christ. Although good works do not lead to justification, justification leads to good works in the life of a believer (Eph. 2:10). Faith without works is dead (Jas. 2:17). While good works do not establish justification, they do verify a genuine faith and make our justification evident to others.*

## CHRIST CONNECTION

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The Jerusalem Council met to resolve a dispute in the early church: Was faith in Christ sufficient for salvation and inclusion into God's family or was something else needed? The early church's response affirmed the sufficiency of faith in Jesus for salvation. Because of His finished work on the cross, Jesus alone is all we need to be saved.

# YOUR STORY

10-15 MINUTES

## GROUP QUESTIONS

God's Story has always been designed to connect with your story. It is because of His Story that our stories make sense, have meaning, and carry on into eternity. Use the questions below to help think through how His Story connects with your own.

- **Why do some Christians struggle to accept that salvation is by grace alone and we don't need to do anything to earn or keep it?** *We have trouble believing anything is free. We are proud and want to do something to fix ourselves rather than accepting the free gift of grace.*
- **What are some of the dangers of relying on our experiences to validate what God is doing? How can we guard against those dangers?** *Our experiences, although they may be real, always need to be checked against the truth of Scripture. God's Word is our ultimate authority, which is why we should always view our experiences through Scripture.*
- **If someone said being a good person plus faith in Jesus is what saves a person, then how would you respond?** *Answers will vary.*
- **What can we learn from this account about how to deal with controversies within the church today?** *Answers to whatever controversies we might have can be settled by looking to Scripture. Setting aside our biases and agendas and looking to Scripture for answers will set us on the right path toward truth and reconciliation.*

### HIS STORY

*God's Story of Redemption, through His Son, Jesus Christ.*

### YOUR STORY

*Where your story meets His.*

# YOUR MISSION

10-15 MINUTES



## HEAD

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The way the Jerusalem Council handled the dispute surrounding circumcision in Acts 15 is an example for how we should handle disputes in the church today. We address disagreements as they arise, appeal to Scripture and what God has done, and call for freedom in Christ and love to guide how we all live together after the issue has been resolved. The Jerusalem Council also emphasized the sufficiency of faith in Jesus for salvation and inclusion into God's family by stating that He alone is all we need for salvation. The early church protected the core message of the gospel.

- **Why is the doctrine of faith alone in Christ alone and not works so important?** *Essentially, this is the heart of the gospel. To deny faith alone in Christ alone is to deny the work of salvation Christ accomplished on the cross.*
- **What can we learn from the way the early church addressed controversy that applies to how we address controversy today?** *They dealt with it directly, appealed to Scripture, and pursued unity, and so forth.*



## HEART

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Circumcision had been a mark of purity and separateness from the world for God's people. Now, in Christ, that mark comes by faith. In Christ, purity and separateness do not lead into salvation, but instead flow out of it. Requiring circumcision before salvation undermined this essential aspect of the gospel. As the apostle Paul would say elsewhere, those who follow Christ experience a circumcision of the heart when they put off the old self and take up the new (Rom. 2:28-29). It is the inner life of faith in Christ that is important, not a ritual act.

- **Why is it important for us to stress that purity flows from faith rather than preceding faith?** *By emphasizing that good works are the natural outcome of a heart of faith, we are saying we are incapable of earning our salvation.*
- **What are some other ways our lives demonstrate a genuine faith in Christ?** *We demonstrate our faith by our love for others, the way we live, showing the fruits of the Holy Spirit in our lives, and so on.*



## HANDS

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Requiring a Gentile to be circumcised before salvation would mean they had to do something to earn the right to be saved, but no one is worthy to be saved. No one deserves an invitation into a relationship with the living God. Salvation is by grace. Grace initiated it. Grace sustained it. Grace fulfills it. Gentiles should not have to do something to earn salvation when no one else did anything to deserve it either.

- **What are some beliefs and traditions we hold onto that may interfere with others understanding the gospel?** *Answers will vary.*
- **How should the truth that salvation is by grace rather than works change the way we live?** *Answers will vary.*

## ▶ ADDITIONAL INFO

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### ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Check out the following additional resources:

- **Leader Training Videos**
- **One Conversations**
- **Midweek Studies (to access your Midweek Study, go to [lifeway.com/TGPMissionWin18](http://lifeway.com/TGPMissionWin18))**
- **Circular Timeline Poster**
- **App (for both leader and student)**



Additional suggestions for specific groups are available at

**[GospelProject.com/AdditionalResources](http://GospelProject.com/AdditionalResources)**

And for ***free online training*** on how to lead a group visit

**[MinistryGrid.com/web/TheGospelProject](http://MinistryGrid.com/web/TheGospelProject)**