



St James Woodley - Resources for Journey through Acts (Part 2)

Chapters 13-21

May – July 2020



Week 4: Grace IS sufficient!



SETTLING

If you left the North Pole, and travelled south along longitude 0°, after about 2,600 miles you'd end up in Greenwich, London. If, by chance, you set off along longitude 1° West (which at the North Pole where all lines of longitude meet, would be an easy mistake to make) by the time you'd covered the same 2,600 miles you'd be here in Reading! If you carried on along 0° to the south coast of West Africa, you'd arrive in the port town of Tema, in Ghana. If you had taken the 1° west course, you would by this stage be nearly 70 miles away from Tema! – as Michael Caine *might* have said “not a lot of people know that!”

Contemplate for a moment, the impact of a seemingly insignificant error if left uncorrected. Is there an instance in your own life, silly or serious, when such a thing has happened?

FOCUSING

“There is nothing that we can do to make God love us more; there is nothing that we can do to make God love us less.” (Philip Yancey – What’s so amazing about grace?)

Take some time to reflect upon the depth of meaning in this statement. Ponder what people THINK they can do to make God love them more. Why, do you imagine, they think like this?

Turn over your ideas about why folk THINK that God doesn't love them and under what circumstances, might they suggest, God would love them even less?

If asked, what would you answer to the question “What’s so amazing about grace?” As you do this, spend time discussing your response with God in prayer, thanking Him and listening to what God said to Paul:

“My grace is enough; it’s all you need. My strength comes into its own in your weakness.” (2Cor.12 vs9)



Acts Chapter 15 – The Council at Jerusalem

Following their return from their first mission trip, Paul and Barnabas are welcomed by the church in Antioch and their news about what God had been up to, (especially that “he had opened the door of faith to the Gentiles”), was warmly received. P&B stay put now in Antioch, happily ministering to the church until one day . . .

Read Acts 15 vs 1-2. It isn't easy for us, in 2020, to grasp just how significant this issue was for the first Christians to grapple with. Judaism (the religious practice) was of course an ingrained and fundamental part of being Jewish. Jesus was a Jew, Peter was a Jew, Paul was a Jew and all had been born and raised in the age-old traditions and all had a grounding in the scriptures and the Law given through Moses.

Change is often not made very welcome, especially when long held and basic beliefs seem threatened. The problem that the Pharisees who had become Christians faced, was that even if they could come to terms with Gentiles becoming Christians, and Paul's insistence that salvation was through "faith" in Jesus, they were convinced that believers HAD to become Jews and be circumcised, first.

Paul and Barnabas's first "Missionary journey" included the area known as Galatia (Iconium, Lystra, Derbe etc). It is really helpful to be aware that Paul's letter to the Galatians is specifically concerned with the issues covered in Chapter 15. The sequence of events seems to be that, after Paul and Barnabas return from their trip, Peter comes from Jerusalem to visit Antioch. While there the "Judaisers" arrive and start teaching that gentile believers must be circumcised. Apparently both Peter and Barnabas are caught up in this and start to shun the gentile believers. (see Galatians 2 vs 11-13) Paul is apoplectic with anger about this and the church in Antioch commission him and Barnabas to go to Jerusalem and work out, with the leaders there, just exactly where things stood with gentile believers.

Paul's anger and frustration were centred upon the essential truth that being put right with God is ONLY achieved by a person having FAITH in JESUS, and in all that He accomplished. However much a person tries to follow the Law or do the right things, including getting circumcised, it makes no difference. There is nothing to be DONE by a person; only FAITH in JESUS and the acceptance of God's grace is required.

Can you figure out just why Paul was so concerned to clarify and establish this? If he had failed to win the argument, what would that have meant for the gentile believers to whom he was taking the gospel? If gentiles did have to get circumcised and follow the Jewish law and traditions, what did that say about the work of Jesus?

Read Acts 15 vs 3-21. In writing Acts, Luke isn't trying to write a comprehensive history of the Early Church. He had a clear intention of scripting more of an overview of how things developed in the first, formative years. Although the meeting in Jerusalem is covered, there isn't much detail about the "nitty gritty" of the differing stances and "ding-dong" discussion of the event. The outcome of it all is explained by a summary of the decision given by James, clearly the voice of authority in the Jerusalem church by then.

Read Acts 15 vs 22-35. Paul may not have got all that he had hoped for from the meeting and it appears that he may not have been totally trusted by the Jerusalem leadership to deliver the outcome back to the church in Antioch, as the message is entrusted to Judas and Silas, as they accompany Paul and Barnabas back north.

So, was this all a bit of a fudge? Gentiles did not have to be circumcised or become Jews but they did have to adhere to the listed restrictions. Given that Antioch, and all places beyond, had no Jewish history and that pagan religions and practices were the order of the day, especially under Roman rule, the instructions to avoid all things concerned with idol worship and pagan temple practices is understandable. With social, civil and business life centred on the places and trappings of idol worship, steering clear was still a tall order for the new converts. The Jerusalem edict perhaps sought to recognise just how poisonous and dangerous was the pervading pagan culture of the gentile world to new believers.

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All this happened a very long time ago!

1500 years later, it was the letter to the Galatians, (especially Gal.2 vs 15-16) that ignited in Martin Luther the realisation that the state of the church of his day, was desperately in need of reformation, for understanding that ***“a person is not justified by the works of the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ. So we, too, have put our faith in Christ Jesus that we may be justified by faith in Christ and not by the works of the law, because by the works of the law no one will be justified.”***- had been forgotten.

Without getting too bogged down in the history of the Reformation, can you suggest why perhaps Luther found these verses so important?

Why might there still be a need in the church today for us to keep a clear understanding of the fact that ***“... it is by grace you have been saved, through faith – and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God –⁹ not by works, so that no one can boast.”*** (Eph 2 vs 8-9)



Spend some time giving thanks to God for His “amazing grace”.

Pray for Christians working to help others through the current crisis that “full of grace and the Holy Spirit” they might through their work convey the light and love of Jesus.

Remember our Mission Partners at home and abroad:

Lamb Hospital in Bangladesh; Fletchers in Thailand; Rays in Tanzania, John Bosco and Kimbilio in D.R.C; and J.A.C. and Yeldall.