

# The Great Hinge

*But we believe that we are saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, in the same way as they (Acts 15.11).*

## Introduction

The Bible is clear that faith has always been required for salvation. The Bible is equally clear that faith *alone* has not *always* been required for salvation. The doctrine of salvation by faith alone began with the glorified Lord's revelation to the Apostle Paul. The goal of this study is to elucidate this truth.

## The Council of Jerusalem

Acts 15 is Luke's record of the Council of Jerusalem in 51 A.D. This council took place because of the conflict between Paul and the Jews in Jerusalem over Paul's gospel of grace (Acts 20.24). We discover this fact in the first verse of Acts 15:

*Some men came down from Judea and kept teaching the brethren, Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved (Acts 15.1).*

The teaching of these Jews from Judea was contrary to what Paul taught. These Jews from Jerusalem were going to Paul's converts and telling them they were not saved. They taught that Paul's gospel was fine so far as it went but that it was not enough. They taught one could not be saved by believing Paul's gospel (1 Corinthians 15.1-4) alone. To be saved, one had to be circumcised and keep the Mosaic Law. Luke recorded the discord this caused:

*And when Paul and Barnabas had great dissension and debate with them, they determined that Paul and Barnabas and some*

*others of them should go up to Jerusalem to the apostles and elders concerning this issue (Acts 15.2).*

The leaders from Jerusalem were creating a tremendous problem for those who were being saved through Paul's ministry. Imagine the confusion! As a result, Paul, with others (Galatians 2.1), agreed to go to Jerusalem to address this matter. While the church desired Paul to go to Jerusalem, Paul declared the Lord Himself revealed to him that he should go (Galatians 2.2). After Paul and his companions arrived, the Jews put forward their position succinctly:

*But there rose up certain of the sect of the Pharisees who believed, saying, That it was needful to circumcise them, and to command them to keep the law of Moses (Acts 15.5).*

Verses 1 and 5 of Acts 15 reveal the issue at stake. Those who opposed Paul were believers. They were saved. They were Jews who had believed the gospel of the kingdom that Jesus was the Messiah, the Son of God (Matthew 16.13-16; John 11.25-27; Acts 8.35-38). Their position was that Paul's Gentile converts were not saved by believing Paul's gospel. Salvation also required circumcision *and* keeping the Mosaic Law.

### Paul's Gospel

Paul explained ([ἀνατίθημι](#)) his gospel to the council (Galatians 2.2).<sup>1</sup> The question that naturally arises is why did Paul need to explain his gospel? Did they not know it? The answer is that while they knew what Paul was teaching—hence the conflict—they did not understand his gospel or why Paul taught what he did. Unlike the Twelve who received their gospel from John the Baptist and Jesus in His earthly ministry, Paul received his gospel directly from the risen, glorified Lord. Paul wrote the Galatians:

<sup>11</sup> *For I would have you know, brethren, that the gospel which*

*was preached by me is not according to man.* <sup>12</sup> *For I neither received it from man, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ (Galatians 1.11-12).*

Paul had little contact with the Twelve (Galatians 1.15-23, 2.1). Instead of going back to Jerusalem after his salvation he went to Arabia and then returned to Damascus. After three years had passed, most of which Paul probably spent in Arabia, Paul visited Jerusalem. While there, he stayed with Peter for fifteen days. But he saw no one else of the Twelve. The only other person he saw was James, the Lord's half-brother (Galatians 1.15-19). Paul explicitly declared that those in Judea did not know him (Galatians 1.22). The gospel those in Judea preached was the gospel of the kingdom, not the gospel of the grace of God (Acts 20.24), which Paul preached. The gospel of the kingdom was the gospel they had proclaimed during Jesus' earthly ministry. It began with John the Baptist (Matthew 3.1-2; Mark 1.4) and Jesus continued it in His earthly ministry (Matthew 4.17; Mark 1.15). The gospel of the kingdom focused upon the *identity* of Christ, that He was the Messiah, the Son of God. Peter preached it following the Lord's resurrection (Acts 2.29-39; 3.12-26). The gospel of the kingdom included repentance, believing Jesus was the Messiah, baptism, and keeping the Mosaic Law. Through this gospel Peter (Matthew 16.15-20) and Martha (John 11.23-27) were saved. Paul too was saved under this gospel. This is clear because it is the gospel Paul preached initially in the synagogues (Acts 9.20). Later, most likely when he was in Arabia, the ascended Christ revealed to Paul the glorious gospel of grace and committed it to him (1 Timothy 1.11). This gospel was that Christ died for our sins and rose from the dead (1 Corinthians 15.1-4). It was *this* gospel that Paul defended before the Jews at the Council in Jerusalem.

Paul emphasized his gospel was a gospel to Gentiles (Galatians 2.2) because the risen Christ had appointed him as the apostle

to the Gentiles (Acts 9.15; Romans 11.13; Ephesians 3.1, 4.1) and commissioned him to be the minister of this gospel of grace (Galatians 1.15-17). Paul's ministry was in stark contrast to the ministry of the Twelve. The Twelve were apostles to Israel, to Jews, not to Gentiles. This explains Peter's great reluctance to go to the house of Cornelius even under the direct command of the Lord (Acts 10, especially Acts 10.28 and 11.1-17).<sup>2</sup> As a result of Paul's testimony before the Council, the Twelve came to understand Paul's gospel was different from the gospel they preached and formally agree that he would go to Gentiles and they would go to Jews (Galatians 2.7-9). The Twelve had not gone to Gentiles and this formally recognized that reality for the future.

The doctrine Paul had received from the risen Christ was that believers of his gospel were not under the Mosaic Law (Romans 6.14). This was Paul's central thesis of his letter to the Galatians. With regard to circumcision, Paul's test case was Abraham. Abraham was justified by God apart from circumcision (Romans 4.10 cf. Galatians 5.2-3). Paul's experience with the Jews at the Jerusalem Council provides particular insight into why he wrote what he did in Romans and Galatians.

### Peter at the Council

One of the interesting facts to note at the Council of Jerusalem is that Peter was not in charge. Peter had been relegated to the status of a glorified bystander. James, the half-brother of Jesus (not James the brother of John) was running things. James was not one of the Twelve. He had come to believe in Jesus after He rose from the dead (1 Corinthians 15.7). From this alone we see how God's kingdom program had fallen away. Paul must have certainly taken note of this fact in addition to understanding that God's program with Israel had changed due to Jewish unbelief. Because of this, he was not impressed with the reputation of the Jews in Jerusalem which included the Twelve. He noted they could add nothing to

what God had given him. Thus, Paul wrote in Galatians 2.5-6, 9:

*<sup>5</sup> But we did not yield in subjection to them for even an hour, so that the truth of the gospel would remain with you. <sup>6</sup> But from those who were of high reputation (what they were makes no difference to me; God shows no partiality)—well, those who were of reputation contributed nothing to me.*

*<sup>9</sup> and recognizing the grace that had been given to me, James and Cephas and John, who were reputed to be pillars, gave to me and Barnabas the right hand of fellowship, so that we might go to the Gentiles and they to the circumcised.*

After having listened to the disputation a good while, Peter finally weighed in. He remembered his visit to the house of Cornelius, a Gentile, a Roman centurion, many years before (Acts 10). In his encounter, Cornelius and his house were all saved. Luke recorded,

*<sup>7</sup> After there had been much debate, Peter stood up and said to them, “Brethren, you know that in the early days God made a choice among you, that by my mouth the Gentiles would hear the word of the gospel and believe. <sup>8</sup> And God, who knows the heart, testified to them giving them the Holy Spirit, just as He also did to us; <sup>9</sup> and He made no distinction between us and them, cleansing their hearts by faith.*

Peter knew of Paul’s testimony from his visit to Jerusalem 14 years ago. But clearly, Peter did not understand the implications. Now, 14 years had passed. During that time the Jews had continued to reject the King and the kingdom. But Gentiles had been responding to Paul’s gospel. Paul’s defense and argument that Gentiles were not under the Mosaic Law resonated with Peter’s own Gentile experience. Thus he

declared in Acts 15.10,

*Now therefore why do you put God to the test by placing upon the neck of the disciples a yoke which neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear?*

Peter understood Israel had failed to keep the Law. The Law was a heavy yoke. He declared to put Paul's converts under such a demand was to "put God to the test," to tempt God. Peter's statement was forceful. It went against all that had been argued by the Jews in Jerusalem. But Peter did not stop. His most radical statement is in the next verse, Acts 15.11:

*But we believe that we are saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, in the same way as they also are.*

## The Great Hinge

Just how revolutionary Peter's statement was to his audience is difficult to appreciate. God had dealt with Israel for 2,000 years.<sup>3</sup> He began the plan to create the nation with his call of Abraham. After 500 years God gave the Law to Moses. The Law governed Jewish life for 1,500 years. Fifteen hundred years is a long time. The Pilgrims landed on Plymouth Rock 400 years ago. That seems a long time ago. But it is nothing compared to how long the Jews had operated under the Mosaic Law.

Two salient points comprised Peter's statement at the Council:

1. Paul was right and the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem were wrong.

Peter recognized God was using Paul in a new and different way. He had his own experience to guide him. Peter had resisted going to see Cornelius but the result of his visit was that Cornelius and his house had been saved. They had received the Holy Spirit just as the Jews had at Pentecost.

But they were never circumcised or brought under the Mosaic Law. God in his foreknowledge had foreseen Paul's future difficulty and had provided Peter with an experience that would serve to rally him to Paul's defense many years later.

2. Jews would now be saved as Gentiles.

For 2,000 years, Gentiles had been saved as Jews. God separated Israel from among the nations and declared they were special (Exodus 19.5-6; Deuteronomy 32.8). If Gentiles wished to be blessed, they had to be blessed through Israel. No other way existed. God had established this arrangement with the Abrahamic Covenant (Genesis 12.1-3). Peter's declaration formally ended this requirement. From now on, Jews had to be saved as Gentiles. That is to say, Jews from now on would have to be saved through Paul's gospel, not the gospel of the kingdom. The significance of this was staggering. But it explains Paul's strong words to the Galatians (Galatians 1.6-9)—which he could not have written prior to the Council of Jerusalem:

*<sup>6</sup> I am amazed that you are so quickly deserting Him who called you by the grace of Christ, for a different gospel; <sup>7</sup> which is really not another; only there are some who are disturbing you and want to distort the gospel of Christ. <sup>8</sup> But even if we, or an angel from heaven, should preach to you a gospel contrary to what we have preached to you, he is to be accursed! <sup>9</sup> As we have said before, so I say again now, if any man is preaching to you a gospel contrary to what you received, he is to be accursed!*

From this time forward *only* Paul's gospel was valid. The gospel of the kingdom, which had begun under John the Baptist, which Jesus preached, which Peter preached at Pentecost, and which the Jews of Jerusalem continued to preach, ceased. Now, only Paul's gospel, that Christ died for our sins and rose

from the dead (1 Corinthians 15.1-4), was valid—for Jews and Gentiles. Any other gospel than the one Paul preached was under God's curse. Thus, salvation by faith alone, faith + 0, that gospel that Paul had preached throughout his ministry, became formally established for Jew and Gentile at the Council of Jerusalem.

3. It is striking the Twelve, James, and the rest of the believers at Jerusalem, made no mention of repentance and baptism. That was the essence of the gospel of the kingdom that began with John the Baptist. Jews were told to repent, believe the gospel, and be baptized—because the kingdom was near in the person of the King. That was the gospel Peter proclaimed at Pentecost (Acts 2.36-38). At the Council, only circumcision and keeping the Law was mentioned.<sup>4</sup>

4. The last point with regard to the decision at the Council is that all of Paul's letters date from after the Council. Paul wrote no letters before that time. Once Paul's gospel was established as the only way of salvation, Paul could disclose all the other teachings the Lord had revealed to him. *In other words, ALL Christian doctrine comes from Paul's letters and they date from after the decision at the Council of Jerusalem.*

## Conclusion

Acts is a transitional book and should be viewed more in terms of explanation rather than doctrine. Luke wrote Acts to explain to Jews why the kingdom of God did not come upon earth. What Luke recorded in Acts 15 fits with his primary purpose of the book: to provide a record of the fall of Israel.<sup>5</sup> Paul wrote the Romans, "For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek" (Romans 1.16). Luke revealed this truth three times in Acts. Paul went to the Jews who rejected his message. After each rejection, he turned to the Gentiles (Acts 13.46, 18.5-6, 28.28-29).



The gospel is at the heart of our all dealings with God. From the time God saved Paul and revealed to him the gospel of the grace of God (Acts 20.24) until the Jerusalem Council men and women could be saved by believing the gospel of the kingdom (for Jews) or the gospel of the grace of God (for Gentiles). In other words, for a period of time there were two valid gospels. One had been revealed and proclaimed by Christ in His earthly ministry and the other had been revealed to Paul through Christ's heavenly ministry. But after the Council, men and women could be saved *only* by believing Paul's gospel (1 Corinthians 15.1-4). Believe it!

<sup>1</sup> The NASB translation of [ἀνατίθημι](#) in Galatians 2.2 as "submitted" is unfortunate. The KJV translation, "communicated" or NIV's "set before" is better but the best translation is "explained." No hint or connotation is conveyed that Paul "submitted" his gospel for approval. The text is explicit about this (Galatians 2.5-6, 9). This word is used one other time by Luke in his record of Festus' explaining Paul's case to King Agrippa (Acts 25.14).

<sup>2</sup> Jewish outreach to Gentiles had not occurred even as late as Acts 11.19, which was 10-11 years after Pentecost. It is only in Acts 11.20 (except for Peter's experience with Cornelius), that we get a glimpse of the beginning of any Jewish witness to Gentiles. Notice this occurred *outside* of Israel, in Antioch. Notice too, when Barnabas came from Jerusalem to investigate this Gentile salvation, he did not return to Jerusalem to the Twelve. Rather, he departed Antioch to find Paul (Acts 11.25-26). This alone should reveal to the diligent student that something different was occurring with regard to Gentile evangelism and that this was occurring outside of ministry of the Twelve. Notice lastly, that it was at Antioch that believers were first called Christians. Thus, Christianity did not begin with the Twelve, in Israel. It began with Paul, outside Israel (Acts 11.26).

<sup>3</sup> After God divided the human race into Jew and Gentile with

the call of Abraham, He began a new plan in which He dealt with Gentiles through the nation of Israel. Israel became the instrument and mediator of God's blessings and Israel became God's favored nation. Apart from Israel, Gentiles had no hope of being blessed by God. Peter and the Twelve understood God's revelation for Israel and this explains why they preached only to Jews and refused to leave Jerusalem—even under immense pressure (Acts 8.1). God's blessings to Israel could come only through the Messiah. And God's blessings to Gentiles had to come through Israel. The Great Commission could not be fulfilled apart from national Israel accepting the Messiah. For this reason, the often recited assertion that the Church's mission is to fulfill the Great Commission opposed to the Scriptures. One only need read Peter's sermons in Acts 2 and 3 to understand this. When it became clear Jews would not repent and accept Jesus as their Messiah (Acts 7), God revealed a new plan He had kept hidden whereby He could bless Gentiles apart from Israel's acceptance of Him as the Messiah. He commissioned Paul (Acts 9) to be the apostle of the Gentiles (Romans 11.13) and communicated to Him this plan. It is through Paul that we learn about God's plan of blessing for Gentiles apart from Israel, of salvation by faith alone, and other secrets. To learn more of the things God had kept secret, see the author's article, [Paul's "Mystery"](#).

<sup>4</sup> I have heard or read of no one who has observed or commented on this fact.

<sup>5</sup> See the author's study, [The Purpose of the Book of Acts](#).

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