

God at the First

by Chuck Smith

The sermon explores the relationship between Gentile believers and the ceremonial law, affirming salvation through faith in Christ alone while emphasizing God's ongoing covenant with Israel.

Duration: 39:04

Scripture: Psalm 89:31

Topics: "Acts"

Description

In this sermon, the speaker emphasizes the fulfillment of God's word and the relevance of the Bible in today's world. He highlights the excitement of studying the prophecies in the scriptures, as they continue to be fulfilled over time. The speaker also acknowledges God's plan of redemption and the inclusion of Gentiles in His salvation through Jesus Christ. James, in his summary judgment, affirms the testimony of Peter and the confirmation of Paul and Barnabas regarding God's work among the Gentiles. He references the prophets who had foretold the calling of Gentiles to worship and glorify God.

Transcript

Let's turn to Acts chapter 15. We want to begin tonight, verse 12. The church council at Jerusalem is considering the issue of the relationship of the Gentile believer to the ceremonial law of Moses.

The bottom issue is this, is it necessary to become a Jew in order to be saved? Now this is something that the Jews have believed for years, that God provided salvation only for Jews, that it was impossible for a Gentile to be saved unless he would become a Jew for salvation was for the Jews only. Now, as the church is expanding, many Gentile believers have come to faith in Jesus Christ. Is it necessary that they become Jews in order to be saved? And this is the issue that is before the church council in Jerusalem.

Whether or not in order for you to be saved, you would have to proselytize and become a Jew through the ritual of circumcision and by keeping the ceremonial law of Moses. This is not an issue of keeping the moral laws of God. Those are a given.

God has established his moral laws and as Christians we are to keep the moral laws of God. Paul wrote to the Corinthians chapter 6 in this first letter, warning them against the sexual sins and all, saying that we know that they which do such things will not inherit the kingdom of heaven. He wrote the same thing to the Ephesians and also to the Galatians.

As to the Galatians, he listed the many works of the flesh, concluding with, and we know that they which do such things shall not inherit the kingdom of heaven. So Paul who was the great apostle to the Gentiles, Paul who was willing to suffer persecution in order to keep the Gentiles free from the ceremonial laws, is advocating and declaring that the moral law of God is an absolute and if you want to inherit the kingdom of heaven, you cannot violate the moral laws of God. So many people don't really separate between the issue of the ceremonial laws and that had to do with your diet and with the washings and with the sacrifices and so forth that were offered.

Those things were all done away with Christ Jesus. Those were set aside. But the moral law of God was never set aside.

And so the Ten Commandments still stand. But the ceremonial laws, this is what they were trying to say that you had to also keep these in order to be saved. So Peter is the first one before the council to address the issue.

And to summarize Peter's thinking, God had sent him, the Holy Spirit had sent him to the Gentiles to bring them the gospel. As he was preaching the gospel, they received it and God filled them with the Holy Spirit. And they had not kept any ceremonial law.

They were still uncircumcised. So Peter said, I recommend that we not try to put on the Gentiles this yoke, heavy yoke that neither we nor our fathers were able to bear. So Peter is voting that the Gentiles not be required to become Jews, that they not be required to keep the ceremonial law.

The next two witnesses before the council are Paul and Barnabas. The ones that basically took the gospel to the Gentile world in their first missionary journey. And so we read that after Peter's testimony, the multitude kept silence.

Now prior to this, up in verse seven, there was a lot of disputing going on, a lot of arguments. But now Peter has presented his case. People are silenced and Paul and Barnabas are now given the opportunity to speak.

I think that courtesy is a Christian grace that we should all practice. They were silent. They let Paul and Barnabas speak their peace.

They gave audience to them. That is, they listened to them as they spoke. Basically, they just shared the things that took place on their first missionary journey as they went to the Gentiles.

The many miracles that were wrought through the power of the Holy Spirit. Now we journeyed with them through that first missionary journey. And as we journeyed with them, we were aware of the miracles.

Luke, as he records, inasmuch as he recorded the journey and the miracles, he didn't feel that it was necessary to re-record them and to tell us all that they said to the council that was there. Just the fact that they shared with them the results, the fruit of their first missionary journey to the Gentiles. He doesn't give us the details of what they shared.

Basically, they were confirming what Peter had already said. And that was that God was obviously working among the Gentiles apart from their observance of ceremonial laws. Now after Paul and Barnabas had spoken, it now comes time for James to speak.

James is sort of giving now his judgment. Sort of the conclusion of the matter. There are two Jameses that are still left.

This is not James, the brother of John. He was already beheaded and he is out of the picture. But there was another disciple by the name of James.

He was identified as the son of Alphaeus. And some believe that this is that James, the son of Alphaeus. And inasmuch as Levi or Matthew was also the son of Alphaeus, these two fellas probably were brothers.

But most commentators, and I would agree with them, believe that the James here, who is taking now the leading role in the church, was the half-brother of Jesus. In Mark's Gospel, it tells us of the fact that when Jesus came back to Nazareth, as he was there in Nazareth, the people said, you know, is this not the son of Mary? And are not his brothers still with us? James, Simon, Judas, and his sisters? And they were really troubled. And that's when Jesus said, a prophet is not without honor except in his own country and among his own family.

It would appear from the New Testament that the brothers of Jesus did not believe that he was the promised Messiah. They, in fact, thought that maybe he had sort of lost it. And at one point in his ministry, they came from Nazareth to Capernaum to sort of rescue him.

Because of the tremendous multitudes that were dogging his steps wherever he went, they figured that the pressure probably just caused him to lose it. And so they were going to come and rescue him from the people. It was not until after the resurrection that his brothers then did indeed believe that he was the Messiah.

And it was at that time that they really became an integral part of the early church. In fact, this James here is probably the half-brother to Jesus, the author of the little practical book of James towards the end of the New Testament. Whereas Jude was the author, the other brother, half-brother of Jesus, was the author of the little book of Jude tucked in just before you get to the book of Revelation.

So it's interesting that Peter is one of the witnesses in the trial, but it would seem that James was the one presiding over the trial. So the one that would be presiding over the trial would be the recognized leader above those that were witnesses in the trial. So much for Peter being the first pope.

It's sort of when you're in court, you're presenting the case before the judge. He is the one who is going to make the determination. And so Peter is presenting the case.

Paul and Barnabas more or less confirm what Peter has said. And now James is going to issue the judgment. Now, as James begins to give his sort of summary judgment, he declares, Now, Simeon, verse 14, has declared how that God at the first did visit the Gentiles to take out of them a people for his name.

He had justified of the call of God how that God had called him to go to the Gentiles. And so he makes reference now to Simeon and Simon. They're both the same name.

How that he has now borne witness of how God called him to the Gentiles that God might take from the Gentiles a people for his name. This work of God in calling Gentiles to faith in Jesus Christ, to call Gentiles to be a part of God's kingdom was something that all of the prophets had borne witness to. Psalm 86, Notice, all nations, not just the Jews, will come and worship before Thee and glorify Thy name.

Psalm 96, 7, Given to the Lord, glory and strength. In Isaiah 11, verse 10, And in that day there shall be a root of Jesse, which shall stand for an ensign of the people, and to it shall the Gentiles seek, and his rest shall be glorious. The call, I mean, the mention of the Gentiles seeking and finding this rest.

Psalm, or Isaiah 42, 6, I, the Lord, have called thee in righteousness and will hold thine hand and will keep thee and give thee for a covenant of the people for a light of the Gentiles. Prophecy concerning Christ, a light unto the Gentiles. Malachi 1, 11, For from the rising of the sun even unto the going down of the same, my name shall be great among the Gentiles.

In every place incense shall be offered unto my name and a pure offering for my name shall be great among the heathen, saith the Lord of hosts. Or the heathen is again Gentiles. So, among the Gentiles, his name will be great.

Now, James said, after this, that is, after the gospel was taken to the Gentiles, then Jesus will return again to build the tabernacle of David, which had fallen down. God had promised to David that there should never cease to be one of his seed sitting upon the throne forever. David interpreted that promise of God as to mean that the Messiah would descend or be a descendant of David.

And so, James declares that after the gospel has been taken to the Gentiles, then the Lord is going to come and he's going to build the tabernacle of David, which has fallen down. Again, God will deal with the Jews. Now, Paul tells us that blindness has happened in part to the Jews until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in.

But then all of Israel shall be saved. Throughout the scripture, this is the common pattern when it speaks of the Gentiles receiving and believing in the promises of God and salvation through Jesus Christ, that there will come a day when God again will work with the nation of Israel. That they, the natural branch, have been cut off for a time.

And we Gentiles, like a wild branch, have been grafted into the tree that we might partake of the nourishment from the tree. But don't boast against the branch that was cut off, because if God cut them off, He's able to again bring them back. And of course, that will happen.

God is not yet through with the nation of Israel. He has unfulfilled promises for them, especially in regards to the throne of David. And Jesus is coming back to fulfill those other prophecies of establishing the throne of David, sitting upon the throne of David forever.

Isaiah 9, 6, For His name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, the Mighty God, the Everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace. And of the increase of His government and His peace, there will be no end, upon the throne of David, to order it and to establish it in righteousness and in judgment from now on, even forever. For the zeal of the Lord of hosts will perform this.

So Jesus is coming to sit as king after David, on the throne of David, the eternal kingdom that God will establish Jesus sitting upon the throne. So the whole book of Hosea is a sort of illustrated picture of this situation where because of Israel's spiritual fornication, actually, turning away from God and embracing other gods, gods of money, gods of power, and other gods, God divorced the nation. Even as God told Hosea to go take a wife that was worthless, and He married her and bore a couple of children, and the last child He said, it's not mine.

And so she left and she went out and ruined her life in just horrible living. Ended up a slave, ended up on the slave market, and the Lord told Hosea, now go and buy her and take her again as your wife. And then God spoke of His undying love for Israel and how in the end He will receive her again and there will be that wild or that natural branch God will again graft it in.

And so Paul says, you know, if the casting away of Israel was salvation of the Gentiles, how glorious do you suppose it will be when there is that great day coming where God again acknowledges them as His people. Paul said, I say then, has God cast away His people talking about Israel? And he said, God forbid. In Psalm 89, there's quite a prophecy there beginning with verse 31 concerning God and the nation of Israel.

God said, if they break my statutes and keep not my commandments, then will I visit their transgression with the rod and their iniquity with stripes. Nevertheless, my loving kindness will I not utterly take from him, nor suffer my faithfulness to fail. My covenant will I not break nor alter the thing that has gone out of my lips.

Once I have sworn by my holiness that I will not lie unto David, his seed shall endure forever and his throne as the sun before me. It shall be established forever as the moon and as the faithful witness in heaven. And the word of the Lord came, and well, that was out of Psalm.

And notice the covenant is related to the sun and to the moon. And in Jeremiah 33, the word of the Lord came to Jeremiah saying, thus saith the Lord, if you can break my covenant of the day and my covenant of the night, and that there should not be day and night in their season, then may also my covenant be broken with David, my servant, that he should not have a son to reign upon the throne and with the Levites, the priests, my ministers. Tell me, is it night? Do you suppose within, you know, another 12-13 hours it'll be daytime again? As long as there is a day and a night, God said you can't break his covenant that he made with David concerning Israel and the throne.

So this idea of replacement theology is heresy. To say that the church has replaced Israel. No, the church has its own place.

And the scriptures are very clear about the place of the church in the whole program of God. But God has a covenant with the nation of Israel that he will not break. And though God has cast them away, God is going to again take them.

But this will be after the Gentiles, after he has fulfilled the prophecies concerning the Gentiles coming to the knowledge and to the light of God. So we are still in that time in which God's primary thrust is among the Gentiles as he is drawing out a bride for his son Jesus Christ. But in this present time, there is no division between a Jew and a Gentile as far as our relationship with God.

We all have to come through Jesus Christ. That is the only way that God has provided for us. At the present time, the Jews are still blinded to the fact that Jesus was indeed the fulfilled promises of the Messiah.

He fulfilled those promises. They're blind to that. God by his Holy Spirit has opened our eyes that we can see.

God will one day open their eyes again once he has fulfilled his purposes among the Gentiles. I believe that we are really almost in a transition period right now. I believe that the fullness of the Gentiles has just

about come in.

I believe that God is winding things down. I think that the conditions in the world today are definitely leading up to the return of Jesus Christ. And when he takes his Gentile bride to the marriage feast, then the Spirit of God will work among the Jews as they are here to face that time of God's judgment that is coming upon the earth because of their rejection of Jesus Christ his son.

Isaiah 16 5, he said, In the mercy and in mercy shall the throne be established, and he shall sit upon it in truth in the tabernacle of David, judging and seeking judgment and hastening righteousness. Hosea 3 5, Afterward shall the children of Israel return and seek the Lord their God and David their king and shall fear the Lord and his goodness in the last days. So there's going to come yet a great move of God among the Jewish people, but that is after his work is completed among the Gentiles.

Isaiah 65, The Lord said, I am sought of them that ask not for me. I am found of them that sought me not. I said, Behold me, behold me unto a nation that was not called by my name.

I have spread out my hands all day long unto a rebellious people, which walked in the way that was not good after their own thoughts. So here in Isaiah 65 again, God offering to the Gentiles, Behold me, behold me. And he had held out his arms of mercy and grace to the Jews, but they did not regard it.

In Amos 9 11, And in that day will I raise up the tabernacle of David that is fallen and close up the breaches thereof. And I will raise up his ruins and I will build it as the days of old that they may possess the remnant of Edom and of all the heathen which are called by my name, saith the Lord that doeth this. Now this is the passage that James is actually quoting here in Acts, this passage out of Amos, where James declares, And to this agree the words of the prophets as it is written, After this, that is after the Gentiles have come in, I will return and build again the tabernacle of David.

When Jesus comes, he will sit upon the throne of David and he will return to the earth the second coming and sit upon the throne of David and I'll build again the ruins thereof and I will set it up. That the residue of men might seek after the Lord and all of the Gentiles upon whom my name is called, saith the Lord who doeth all these things. And so James is quoting from the Old Testament and he's looking at the overall plan of God and the place of the Gentiles in the overall plan of God, but it doesn't take away from the fact that God is going to again send his son who will return and establish the kingdom of David.

For James then declares, Known unto God are all his works from the beginning of the world. In other words, these things that are happening are the fulfillment of the prophecies of the Old Testament because God knew all of the things from the beginning of the world. This is one of those passages of scriptures that we use to teach the omniscience of God.

God knows everything. Known unto him are all things from the beginning of the world. God has always known you.

He knew you before you were ever born. He knew all about you. He knew every facet of your life and of my life.

Known unto him are all things from the beginning of the world. Knowing us, he called us that we should be conformed to the image of his son, that we should receive the grace of God and this glorious gift of salvation, that we might be a part of his kingdom. And what a wonderful thing it is to know that God has known us, he's called us, that we might be heirs of God, joint heirs through Jesus Christ.

It's just almost overwhelming to think of it. In Isaiah 41, beginning with verse 4, he said, Who hath wrought and done it, God, speaking of God, who has wrought and done it, calling the generations from the beginning. I, the Lord, the first and with the last, I am he.

Who is it that has wrought this and done it? I, the Lord. Isaiah 42, 9. Behold, the former things are come to pass, and the new things do I declare before they spring forth. I tell you of them.

Isaiah 44, 7. And who as I shall call and shall declare it and set it in order for me, since I appointed the ancient people and the things that are coming and shall come, let them show unto them. Remember the former things of old, for I am God, there is none else. I am God and there is none like me, declaring the end from the beginning and from ancient times the things that are not yet done, saying, my counsel shall stand and I will do all my pleasure.

So here is God declaring, look, I'm God from the ancient times. I've told you things that were going to be and my purposes are going to stand. That's why it is so interesting and exciting to read the prophecies in the scriptures of the last days, because we know the things that are going to transpire.

We know the invasion of Israel by the Muslim nations, which is going to take place. We don't know exactly when it will happen, but it certainly looks like we are close to that particular prophecy being fulfilled. As we see the alignment now today, we see the issues that are involved as far as the nation of Israel is concerned.

And so God said, I've declared the end from the beginning and from ancient times the things that are not yet done, saying, my counsel shall stand and I will do all my pleasure. So as James is now sort of making his summary judgment, acknowledging what Peter has said, the call of God to the Gentiles, recognizing that this is a fulfillment of the prophecies, recognizing that after God has brought in the Gentiles, that then Jesus will return and establish the kingdom of David, the kingdom of God, and as sitting as the descendant of David upon the throne, as God has made the covenant and promise to David, which he will not break because God spoke of these things, because known unto him from the beginning are all things. God has always known the plan and the purpose that he was going to bring forth upon the world.

And so James is just affirming now the fact that God's word of prophecy shall come to pass. Thus far, God's betting a hundred percent. So if you try to discount what has not yet been fulfilled, you're really betting against tremendous odds.

God is going to keep his word, his promises. James acknowledges this. This is just the fulfillment of the word of God.

And so we look at the world today and the same is true. We can see that God in ancient times spoke of the things which were not yet, but are happening around us in our world today. That's what makes the Bible such an exciting book.

That's what makes the Bible an ever current book. It never grows old. It actually becomes more exciting with each passing year because there are that many more prophecies that are being fulfilled or coming into fruition.

So it's exciting to be studying the word of God and to realize that God's purposes shall stand. His word shall stand. Let's pray.

Father, we thank you for your glorious plan of redemption and that it was your purpose all the while to bring the message of salvation to we Gentiles. We who were once far off, alienated from your life because of our sins, have been brought close through Jesus Christ. And we thank you, Lord, that he broke down that wall that used to exist between the Jew and the Gentile, making us both one new creatures in Christ Jesus.

And Lord, we just pray that tonight your spirit will continue his work in our hearts as he unfolds to us your truths and as he leads us, Lord, in your ways. May we be faithful, Lord, in all things. In Jesus' name we pray.

Amen. Shall we stand? Tonight, if you have a problem, if you have a need, if you just desire some fellowship and prayer, the pastors are down here at the front for that purpose of ministering to you in the things of the Spirit. God has called these men and God has ordained these men to be his instruments in bringing his love and his work unto you.

So we would encourage you that after we're dismissed, if you're in need of prayer, just make your way forward and they'll be here and they'll pray for you and they'll minister to you and God will work through them his work in your heart and in your life. I love you, Lord, and I lift my voice to worship you. Oh, my soul rejoice.

Take joy, my King, in what you hear. May it be a sweet, sweet sound in your ear.

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