

Life Essentials

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Acts 15:22-29

Sermon Series:
God's Big Story

*Is believing in
Jesus alone
enough to give
you a
relationship
with God and
to get you into
heaven?*

God's Big Story, as Pastor Pete likes to say, may be expressed in three words: creation, fall and redemption. It involves God's creation of our world and of our lives, our fall away from God due to our own sin and mismanagement of our lives, and our redemption and restoration to friendship with God and each other through the person Jesus. All summer, we have been following an exciting portion of God's Big Story through the wonderful book of Acts. We have seen the widening circle of people coming to believe in Jesus expand from the area right around Jerusalem to Caesarea, sixty miles away, to Antioch three hundred miles away into Asia Minor, and to all sorts of very distant places. Thousands of Jews had come to believe in the resurrection of Jesus and decided to follow him, and even more thousands of non-Jews, who were called Gentiles, were embracing Jesus. Things were going well until a very significant issue threatened to split the church. It is captured for us in the first two verses of chapter 15.

"Then certain individuals came down from Judea and were teaching the brothers, 'Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.'² 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 discuss this question with the apostles and the elders" (Acts 15:1-2). A great many Gentiles, non-Jews, were becoming believers who knew very little about the faith of the Jews, as expressed in what we call the Old Testament. Some very traditional Jews from the area around Jerusalem believed that these new, non-Jewish Gentile believers needed to follow all of the laws of the Jewish people in order to be saved. That is, to have a relationship with God and to be welcomed into heaven. They traveled the three hundred miles to Antioch and began saying this to all of the non-Jewish believers in Jesus and a huge controversy erupted. As a result, as Acts says, "Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and debate with them."

Notice all of the people in this debate were Christians. All of them believed in Jesus. The question was: Is believing in Jesus alone enough to give you a relationship with God and to get you into heaven? Or is something else, such as the Old Testament law, also necessary? Is salvation the result of Jesus alone or Jesus plus—Jesus plus the Jewish law or Jesus plus good works or Jesus plus passing some test?

A lot of people think getting into heaven requires “Jesus Plus”—faith in Jesus, plus being good enough to pass some test.

There is a story of three people who died, and all three reached Heaven's gates at the same time. St. Peter is waiting for them. He tells them he has an errand to run and asks them to wait outside. Finally, Peter returns and calls the first person into his office. He apologizes for the wait. “Oh, I don't mind at all,” the person says, “I'm so thrilled just to be here in Heaven.” St. Peter is delighted by this attitude. “Well, then, if you can just answer one question for me. Tell me, how do you spell ‘God’?” The person spells it for him, “G-o-d” and goes on into the joy of heaven. St. Peter calls in the next person and apologizes for the wait. “It will be worth it, I'm sure in order to see God face to face.” St. Peter is very pleased. He insists, though, on asking one more question. “Tell me, how do you spell ‘God’?” The person spells it perfectly, of course, “G-o-d,” then walks through the Pearly Gates. Finally, St. Peter calls in the third person. He also apologizes to him for the wait, but this person replies, “You were quite rude! All my life on earth I had to wait in lines, wait at the checkout counter, wait at the bus stop, wait for the kids to get home from school, wait for my coffee break. And now you expect me to wait to get into Heaven? Well, I just won't stand for it!” St. Peter says, “I'm so sorry, please answer one more question for our Records, then you can go on in. Tell me, how do you spell ‘Czechoslovakia’?”

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Plus”—faith in Jesus, plus being good enough to pass some test. In the early church, some were saying it's Jesus, plus keeping the Law of God. Paul and those with him were saying it's trust in Jesus alone that leads to salvation. Since this issue was so significant, Paul and Barnabas and others made the trip to Jerusalem for what has been called the first council of the church. All of the significant players, the apostles, the elders and many leaders were there. The debate began when a group of Pharisees who were also believers in Jesus said it is necessary for the Gentiles to observe the Law of Moses. For them, it was “Jesus, plus the Law.” After great debate, four huge voices had their say. First Peter, Peter the Rock, reminded them that God had sent him to speak to the non-Jew, the Gentile Cornelius, the Roman Centurion in Caesarea and that all of the people who gathered with Cornelius became followers of Jesus. Peter's point was that he, Peter, had nothing to do with it—that God alone chose to welcome Cornelius on the basis of faith in Jesus alone and that God chooses to welcome you and me to Jesus on the same basis. Peter concludes by saying, why put on the yoke of the Law that we, the Jews, have been unable to carry. On the contrary, we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will. It's faith in Jesus alone!

Next up to speak were Barnabas and Paul. They told of the incredible ways they had seen God open doors for people unconnected with the Jewish faith to become believers in

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Jesus. Finally, James stood to speak. James was the brother of Jesus. James was not one of the twelve Apostles, but after the resurrection, Jesus appeared to James, just one-on-one. Can you imagine the intensity of that moment, brother with brother? James was so good he became known as James the Just. His knees were famously so calloused they looked like the knees of camels because he spent so much time on his knees praying. So when James stood up to speak, everyone knew how immensely he was respected by the most orthodox and traditional of the Jews. James quotes several verses from the Old Testament as he agreed with what Peter had said by saying, “¹⁶After this I [the Lord] will return, and I will rebuild the dwelling of David, which has fallen; from its ruins I will rebuild it, and I will set it up, ¹⁷so that all other peoples may seek the Lord—even all the Gentiles over whom my name has been called.’ Thus says the Lord, who has been making these things ¹⁸known from long ago. ¹⁹Therefore, I have reached the decision that we should not trouble those Gentiles who are turning to God, ²⁰but we should write to them to abstain only from things polluted by idols and from fornication and from whatever has been strangled and from blood” (Acts 15:16-21).

I love how James puts it “that we should not trouble those Gentiles who are turning to God.” When it came to salvation, it was faith in Jesus alone. It was Jesus,

plus nothing! We put our trust in Jesus alone to forgive our sins and to restore us to fellowship with God. That is what redemption is all about. James was saying they were not going to weigh the Gentile believers down with the rules and regulations of the Jewish faith so that it became faith plus works. It is just faith in Jesus. At the same time, James and those with him knew that it would be appropriate for the Gentile believers to respect the consciences of their Jewish fellow-believers and that faith in Jesus does lead to a life that reflects the person and the purity of Jesus. So James suggested four practices for Christians that reflect the purity of the Lord they worshipped. First, abstain from things polluted by idols. What is an “idol?” Well, it’s not American Idol! An idol is anything that you substitute for God. Edward Bosworth once said, “What gets your attention gets you!” What gets your attention in such a way as to get your eyes off of your Lord is an idol. In the day of the book of Acts, people often sacrificed food to their idols, their little gods, and when a Christian ate such food, it suggested that he approved of the idol. So Peter and the council said don’t eat such food. While food sacrificed to idols is not a part of our culture today, it is appropriate to ask, “What are the idols of our day? What do people worship rather than God?” In the present, “It’s all about me” age, we can easily be our own idols, substituting our own anxieties for God. Our time, our money, our security, our choices, our opinions, our addictions, dependencies and pre-

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Second, James said abstain from fornication. The Greek word is *porneia*, and it refers to any intimate physical union (in one's mind or with one's body) outside of the marriage of a husband and a wife as illicit and inappropriate. We are called to live either in fidelity within the covenant of marriage between a man and a woman or chastity in singleness. Yet our culture has separated physical intimacy from marriage between a man and a woman and tells us constantly that you may have one without the other. We see it affirmed in the news of the day, in the advice columnists of the day, in the shows of the day. We pastors see this all the time with people who want to be married who already share living quarters.

James says abstain from idols, abstain from *porneia*, and, finally, abstain from what has been strangled and from blood. God says in the book of Leviticus: "I will set My face against that person who eats blood and will cut him off from among his people. For the life of the flesh is in the blood, and I have given it to you on the altar to make atonement for your souls; for it is the blood by reason of the life that makes atonement" (Leviticus 17:10b-11). In our day, the genre of horror, with movies such as *Halloween II*, with its focus on blood, or the current fixation on vampires in the *Twilight Saga*, *Vampire Academy* and *The Vampire Diaries*, portray all sorts of human drama, yet have

at their center the abuse of blood and life. The defining issue is not simply blood, but it is the value of life from the beginning of life to the moment we go to be with Jesus and beyond.

You see, for the Christians living in the days of the book of Acts and for us who follow Jesus today, the issue is what kind of life reflects the life of the Lord who loves us? How does that kind of life stand out from what our culture approves? Over the summer, we have studied two words of immense significance, the Hebrew word *hinnainee* and the Greek word *makrothumia* and, while I don't expect you to remember those words, I do want you to remember what they stand for. *Hinnainee* is translated "Here I am." When God called Moses and Samuel and Ananias and countless others, they replied, "Hinnainee—here I am." So when you and I realize our Lord would have us do something, our faithful response is not *hinnai-no* but *hinnainee* -yes, Lord – here I am to serve you.

The word *makrothumia* means, literally, the long temper—the opposite of a short temper. It is often translated patience, but we understand it also means the grace of getting along. When faced with annoying or challenging situations that arise in life, we can choose to grumble and gripe or, with grace, we can choose to work with the situation. Clearly *hinnainee* and *makrothumia* go together. If I say, "Here I am" but do it with a grumble, gripe, growl and grimace, then clearly my "Here I am" is really a "Here I am – not!"

Either you take your clues about what is right and wrong in life from our wider culture, or you take it from the Words our Lord communicated to us in the Scriptures, the Bible.

Now this morning, I want to talk about one more huge word; this time an English word but one that you probably didn't use over breakfast either, the word *epistemology*. Epistemology is a branch of philosophy that has to do with the theory of knowledge. Epistemology is how you know what you know. How do I know that Senator Edward Kennedy was laid to rest yesterday at Arlington National Cemetery? I didn't know him personally, but I read the papers, I read the internet, I watched television. Those sources are my epistemological basis for what I know about him.

Suppose you get into a discussion with someone and say, "I believe life is to be centered on God (and not idols), that physical intimacy is reserved for the marriage of a man and a woman, and that we are to value life. Suppose the person replies, "How do you know that? Why do you think that?" They are asking a question of your epistemology. How do you know what you know? Either you take your clues about what is right and wrong in life from our wider culture, or you take it from the Words our Lord communicated to us in the Scriptures, the Bible. So you would reply, God has spoken to us through His prophets and apostles and their words recorded in the Bible are the epistemological basis for what I know about these matters.

Now, notice how these three words, *hinnainee*, *makrothumia* and *epistemology*, work together. I

say—you say—to our Lord, "*Hinnainee* - Here I am." I am available to do your bidding. I want my life to reflect your life. So Lord, what is it you want me to do? I will study your Word as I base my epistemology, how I know what I know, on what you have to say, Lord. When following those words is difficult for me or they ask me to do something I don't want to do, I will demonstrate a *makrothumia*—a grace of getting along with people and with you, Lord—in my attitude and behavior." So we pull the three words together— *hinnainee*, *epistemology* and *makrothumia*. What happens if you separate them?

A woman was being tailgated by a man who was driving an expensive Lexus on a busy road like Maple avenue. Suddenly, the light turns yellow, just in front of her. She does the honest thing, and stops at the crosswalk, even though she could have beaten the red light by accelerating through the intersection. The tailgating man in the Lexus hits the roof and the horn, screaming in frustration as he misses his chance to get through the intersection behind the lady. As the man is still in mid-rant, he hears a tap on his window and looks up into the face of a very serious police officer. The officer orders him to exit his car with his hands up. He takes him to the police station where he is searched, fingerprinted, photographed, and placed in a cell. After a couple of hours, a policewoman approaches the cell and opens the door. He is escorted back to the booking desk, where the arresting officer is waiting with his personal

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effects. He says, "I'm very sorry for this mistake." "You see, I pulled up behind your car while you were blowing your horn, screaming, and cussing a blue streak at the lady in front of you. I noticed the 'Choose Life' license plate holder, the 'What Would Jesus Do?' bumper sticker, the 'Follow Me to Sunday School' bumper sticker, the 'Honk if you love Jesus' bumper sticker and the chrome-plated Christian fish emblem on the trunk. Naturally, I assumed you had stolen the car."

In this case, the man would have said he believed in Jesus (*hinnainee* – here I am, Lord). He was a student of the Bible and would have agreed that it was the epistemological basis for his life. But in that particular situation, his *hinnainee* was *hinnai-no*, and his *makrothumia*, the grace of getting along, was *markro-grumpyness*. Now let me ask you, what do you think Jesus thought of that man at that moment? Jesus loved that man more than his next breath! Remember, our salvation is based on Jesus, plus nothing! In our good moments and in our lesser ones, we are saved by the grace of Jesus as we put our faith and trust in him. At the same time, when our behavior is off the mark, our Lord calls us to confess our sin and to walk in a manner that is a reflection of his purity and his love.

The early church wanted you and me to know that all of us are welcome to our Lord simply as we trust in and follow Jesus. He loves you, gave himself for you, is always thinking wonderful

thoughts about you and invites you to believe in him and follow him. The early church also wanted us to know that our lives reflect that love of our Lord as we live our lives in the practices that reflect the loving behavior and grace of our Lord himself.

