

BY GOD'S GRACE ALONE

Acts 15:1-35

Key Verse: 15:11

“No! We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved, just as they are.”

In the last passage we learned from St. Paul the message to idol worshiping people. He proclaimed: “Turn from worthless things to the living God.” St. Paul also taught us the spirit of a Christian. Right after being stoned and left for dead, he got up and went back into the city. Then he said, “We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God.” We should not avoid hardships. We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God. We can do so when the Spirit of Jesus who rose from the dead is in our hearts.

Today's passage describes the first church Council held in Jerusalem. It convenes to consider whether Gentile Christians need to be circumcised to be saved. There are many things to learn from this event. Most important is the pure and universal gospel faith that all Christians, be they Jew or Gentile, are saved by God's grace alone. The phrase, “By God's grace alone,” was a major tenet of the Reformation. However, fallen man is always tempted to try to add something to God's grace. May God help us to realize that we are saved by God's grace alone.

First, “Unless you are...” (1-5).

We can imagine how spirited and visionary the Antioch church might have been after the first missionary journey of Paul and Barnabas. They must have put maps of Galatia in the walls of their houses and marked the cities Paul and Barnabas had visited with red dots. Perhaps they prayed every day for the new converts, calling those whom they knew by name. Many may have decided to go as missionaries to other nations in the Roman world. However, before the gospel continued its advance, an issue arose that needed to be resolved by the church.

Look at verse 1. Some men came down from Judea to Antioch and said, “Unless you are circumcised, according to the custom taught by Moses, you cannot be saved.” Here “circumcision” means more than a surgical procedure. It means to acknowledge the entire Jewish law as binding and necessary for salvation. The Gentile Christians at Antioch had simply accepted the gospel message by faith. Then the Holy Spirit worked in their hearts to forgive their sins and give them a living hope in the kingdom of God. They had simple faith that they were God's children. But these men claimed that in addition, they needed to be circumcised and obey the law of Moses. This brought Paul and Barnabas into sharp dispute with them. Paul and Barnabas strongly believed that the Gentiles were saved only by believing the gospel. They debated the matter vociferously. But it could not be solved in Antioch. It had to be settled in Jerusalem, where the problem began. So the Antioch church appointed Paul and Barnabas, along with some other believers, to go to Jerusalem to see the apostles and elders about this question.

The church sent them on their way. Paul and Barnabas were not burdened by the task. They welcomed the opportunity to tell what God had done among the Gentiles. As they traveled through Phoenicia and Samaria, they shared the conversion stories of the Gentile believers. They loved to tell the marvelous things God had done. They must have been singing, “I love to tell the story of unseen things above, of Jesus and his glory, of Jesus and his love....” Those who heard about God's work among the Gentiles were very glad.

When they came to Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the church. A delegation of leaders must have thanked God for their safe arrival and put flowers around their necks. Paul and Barnabas began to share with them what God had done among the Gentiles. They must have told about the fruitful ministry in Antioch, where scores of disciples were ready to go as missionaries to the Roman world. They must have reported about their first mission journey, telling how Sergius Paulus had been converted by a great sign from God and how the whole island of Cyprus was now a ripe mission field. They must have told about the birth of new believers in Pisidian Antioch, Iconium, Lystra and Derbe.

Though Paul and Barnabas reported joyfully, there was tension in the air. They had to settle the issue of circumcision of Gentiles. There would be no spiritual unity until it was resolved. In due time, some believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees stood up and said, "The Gentiles must be circumcised and required to obey the law of Moses." In our times, some say, "Unless you are baptized in my church you cannot be saved." How did the Jerusalem church resolve this issue?

Second, by God's grace alone (6-11).

The apostles and elders met to consider this question. Their lengthy discussion is not recorded. It was not worth writing down. Yet it was necessary. Each leader must have stood and said what he had to say. It took a long time. We can learn that when a church decides critical issues, it is very good for leaders to discuss everything.

Finally, Peter stood up. Peter could have spoken with an air of authority. But he did not. After letting everyone else speak, he said, "Brothers, you know that some time ago God made a choice among you that the Gentiles might hear from my lips the message of the gospel and believe" (7). As we studied in chapter 10, the conversion of Cornelius was carefully orchestrated by God. There could be no doubt that God led Peter to Cornelius and vice versa. Through that event, God taught Peter to accept the Gentiles. Peter summarized what he learned in Acts 10:34,35: "I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism but accepts men from every nation who fear him and do what is right." God had accepted the Gentiles. So Peter accepted the Gentiles. Shortly thereafter, at a meeting of leaders, the Jerusalem church also accepted the Gentiles. Still, however, some of the circumcision party thought that the Gentiles must be circumcised to be saved. What did Peter say?

Look at verses 8-9. "God, who knows the heart, showed that he accepted them by giving the Holy Spirit to them, just as he did to us. He made no distinction between us and them, for he purified their hearts by faith." Peter's point is that God gave the Holy Spirit to the Gentiles when they simply believed the gospel from their hearts. The gift of the Holy Spirit is everything to a Christian. It is the sign of God's approval and acceptance. If one has received the Holy Spirit, he is a child of God. God gave the Holy Spirit to the Gentiles when they believed the gospel message. They were not circumcised first. As soon as they believed the message, the Holy Spirit came on them. Clearly, to God, Gentiles did not need to be circumcised to be saved.

What matters to God is the heart of man. To God, the problem with the Gentiles was not their lack of etiquette, strange appearance, or peculiar observances, but their hearts. Their hearts were dirty with sin. The Gentiles were especially characterized as immoral and lawless. But when they accepted the gospel by faith, something happened in their hearts. The blood of Jesus purified their hearts. They were changed from the inside out. They were washed and cleansed and made pure before the holy God. All the idols and bad images were cleansed from their souls and they could enjoy fellowship with Jesus. They could worship Jesus as God in spirit and truth. They began to love and serve God with all their

hearts and souls and strength. This was possible only by the work of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit came when they accepted Jesus by faith. It was purely the work of God. John 1:12-13 says, "Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God—children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God."

Look at verse 10. "Now then, why do you try to test God by putting on the necks of the disciples a yoke that neither we nor our fathers have been able to bear?" God had made it very clear that he accepted the Gentiles when they simply believed the gospel. To ignore God's clear revelation was to test God. Here "test God" means to test God's patience and to make him angry by one's stubborn refusal to believe what God has made plain.

Look at vers 11. "No! We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved, just as they are." Peter makes a very emphatic statement that people are saved by God's grace alone. This is as much a personal testimony as a theological statement. Peter himself was saved by God's grace alone. He did not choose Jesus; Jesus chose him by his grace. Peter was just an ordinary fisherman. He could have spent his whole life chasing fish across Lake Galilee, spending nights and weekends with his family. At last, he would have passed from this world to the next, separated from God and destined for eternal condemnation. But Jesus visited him and revealed his divine nature through a great catch of fish. At that time Peter said, "Go away from me, Lord; I am a sinful man!" (Lk 5:8) But Jesus opened his eyes to God's glorious calling as Jesus' disciple. In spite of Peter's mistakes and failures, Jesus embraced him and prayed for him and had hope for him. Even so, at the end of the earthly messianic ministry, when Jesus was being tried and condemned for sinners, Peter denied him three times. It was a total and complete failure. Yet Jesus did not condemn Peter. Jesus died for Peter's sins. Jesus was wounded in Peter's place. Jesus bore all the shame and guilt of Peter's sins in his own body. Later Peter wrote, "He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed" (1Pe 2:24). Peter knew that he was a sinner, nothing more. But Jesus forgave his sins and gave him eternal life and the kingdom of God by his one-sided grace. Peter was saved by God's grace alone.

Likewise, the Jews were saved by God's grace alone. The Gentiles were saved by God's grace alone. Paul knew this so well. Paul wrote in Ephesians 2:8,9, "For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast." If we contributed even 1% to our salvation, we would boast about it as though we did 80%. God, in his wisdom, saves us by his grace alone. The glory for salvation work belongs to God alone. When we realize this we can be happy and fruitful. The Greek word for "grace" is "charis," which is related to "thanks" and "beauty." Those who know the grace of God are thankful to God and compassionate toward others. On the other hand, those who live by self-righteousness and pride are quick to complain and legalistic toward others. The secret of happiness as a human being is to realize the grace of God and live by it. May God help each of us to repent of self-righteousness and pride and realize we are saved by God's grace alone.

Third, the Council's decision was based on the word of God (12-21).

No doubt, Peter's testimony carried great weight in the Jerusalem Council. It gave the clear principle that salvation comes by God's grace alone, not by human merit of any kind. On this basis, Barnabas and Paul began to share what God had done among the Gentiles through them. They told of miraculous signs and wonders God did. They must have told the story of the healing of the crippled man in Lystra in

detail. Their mission report was so fascinating and heart-moving that all the Council members listened intently as they spoke, although no one said, "Amen."

When they finished, James spoke up. This James was the brother of Jesus and the moderator of the Jerusalem Council. Since Peter's miraculous escape from prison, James emerged as the leader of the Jerusalem church. They say he was a most Christ-like person in his humbleness, love, and purity, and especially in the life of prayer. It was up to him to share the judgment of the Council.

Look at verses 14-18. James begins by recognizing Peter's testimony of what God had done among them. In fact, Peter is an apostle, and he represents the New Testament. Then James quotes the words of the prophets: "'After this I will return and rebuild David's fallen tent. Its ruins I will rebuild, and I will restore it, that the remnant of men may seek the Lord, and all the Gentiles who bear my name, says the Lord, who does these things' that have been known for ages." The prophets represent the Old Testament. Thus, we can say that James refers to the New Testament and the Old Testament as the basis for his decision. The Council recognized the word of God alone as the final authority. They based their decision on the word of God.

Look at verse 19. "It is my judgment, therefore, that we should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God." In essence, James was saying that since God had accepted the Gentiles simply by faith and by grace, the church should not make it harder for them. They should not burden the Gentiles with Jewish legalism. Instead, they should accept the Gentiles into Christian fellowship. Although James makes this decision, it seems to have been the consensus of the entire Council (22). In this way, the issue of circumcision—that evoked passion in the hearts of many—was settled in a meaningful way. At the same time, all believers, both Jew and Gentile, could be united in the church.

James went on to give a few instructions to the Gentiles. Look at verse 20. "Instead we should write to them, telling them to abstain from food polluted by idols, from sexual immorality, from the meat of strangled animals and from blood." Most likely, this promoted fellowship between Jews and Gentiles, especially eating fellowship.

Fourth, peace and unity are restored (22-35).

The apostles and elders drafted a letter to the Gentile churches informing them of their decision. In addition to the letter, they sent some top leaders, Judas and Silas, to confirm in person the decision of the Council. They treated the Gentile believers with genuine respect and love. They really reached out to the Gentile believers to embrace them, explaining that the circumcision party had gone out without authorization. The main point of the letter was not stated explicitly, but it was implied: "We recognize the work of God in Antioch and welcome you into Christian fellowship." When this letter was delivered to them, the Antioch church members were glad for its encouraging message. They were glad to study the Bible with Judas and Silas. Then they sent them off with the blessing of peace to return to Jerusalem. After that, it was "back to the Bible" for Paul and Barnabas. They taught the word of God diligently in Antioch.

In this passage we learn that we are saved by God's grace alone. It is not by anything we have done, but by what God has done for us. God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life (Jn 3:16). When we believe this gospel, God forgives our sins, purifies our hearts, and gives us the Holy Spirit. It is totally God's grace. This grace makes us

thankful to God. This grace enables us to embrace others with love and respect. May God help us to accept the grace of God in our hearts deeply.