

The God Who Saves – by Grace, by Faith, through Christ Alone (Part 2)

Acts 7:1-16

Turn in your Bibles to Acts 7 and while you do, let me share with you one of the most remarkable verses concerning our salvation; Ephesians 2:8-9. There we read:

8 For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; 9 not as a result of works, so that no one may boast.

In these two verses, we learn that salvation comes to us first, by grace alone, for it is "by grace you have been saved." God's unmerited, unearned and unsolicited favor toward sinners who otherwise deserve nothing by His wrath is the first part of salvation. Next, we see that this grace is experience through faith. As a straw is nothing but the means by which to partake of the refreshing liquid found in the glass, so is faith nothing but the conduit through which the refreshing, reviving power of God's saving grace is experienced by the sinner. Without faith, there is no experiencing of the grace. But notice that even the conduit of faith, like the grace itself is a gift of God. Thus, verse eight reveals that we are saved by grace alone, by faith alone. Finally, notice that all of this is "not of yourselves" – none of this originates in us; it is not that we are lucky enough, smart enough, or worthy enough; it is not a result of human works at all. Rather as verse 10 tells us, "For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus..." In other words, this salvation, this grace and this faith is all for and made possible by Christ Jesus alone.

And this familiar chorus of grace alone, faith alone and Christ alone is found in these opening verses of Stephen's speech to ruling counsel of Jews. Last week we noted how Stephen first sought to remind his hearers that the reason why they were living in Jerusalem, in the midst of the Promised Land was an act of grace on the part of God to Abraham (7:4). He reminded them that Abraham had been called by grace out of Mesopotamia, out of the land of the Chaldeans, this former pagan idol worshipper who deserved God's wrath to the land of promise. Stephen reminded his hearers that even the great patriarchs, the sons of Jacob, who sold their brother Joseph into slavery in Egypt never earned God's favor and in fact deserved to die. The point being that everything that these hearers were now experiencing was an act of grace alone; undeserved by Abraham, undeserved by the patriarchs and undeserved by the current generation of Israel. Salvation from God, whether in a physical sense and/or in a spiritual sense, is always and only an act of God's grace. That was the first of three solas; the first of three saving acts that are from God alone, namely that God has always saved by grace alone; *solus gratia*.

That is enough review and this brings us to the second of the solas, *solus fide*, faith alone and we see that God has always saved by faith alone in verses three through eight.

II. God has always saved by faith alone in His promises (7:3-8)

1 The high priest said, "Are these things so?" 2 And he said, "Hear me, brethren and fathers! The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham when he was in Mesopotamia, before he lived in Haran, 3 and said to him, 'LEAVE YOUR COUNTRY AND YOUR RELATIVES, AND COME INTO THE LAND THAT I WILL SHOW YOU.' 4 Then he left the land of the Chaldeans and settled in Haran. From there, after his father died, God had him move to this country in which you are now living. 5 But He gave him no inheritance in it, not even a foot of ground, and yet, even

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when he had no child, He promised that HE WOULD GIVE IT TO HIM AS A POSSESSION, AND TO HIS DESCENDANTS AFTER HIM. 6 "But God spoke to this effect, that his DESCENDANTS WOULD BE ALIENS IN A FOREIGN LAND, AND THAT THEY WOULD BE ENSLAVED AND MISTREATED FOR FOUR HUNDRED YEARS. 7 " 'AND WHATEVER NATION TO WHICH THEY WILL BE IN BONDAGE I MYSELF WILL JUDGE,' said God, 'AND AFTER THAT THEY WILL COME OUT AND SERVE ME IN THIS PLACE.' 8 And He gave him the covenant of circumcision; and so Abraham became the father of Isaac, and circumcised him on the eighth day; and Isaac became the father of Jacob, and Jacob of the twelve patriarchs

So we have seen Stephen's declaration that it was the grace of God that established and kept the nation Israel. Next, we see Stephen putting an emphasis upon the particular faith of Abraham. And this is really remarkable to consider, for God made great and glorious promises to Abraham, promises of land, seed or descendants, and great blessing. However, Abraham did not personally receive what God had promised. As you read through Genesis, we find that Abraham never possessed any portion of the land of Canaan. What God had promised to Abraham and his descendants did not even begin to be realized for another 25 years.

It is not small thing that Stephen quotes from Genesis 15 in verses 5-7. Genesis 15 is one of the foundational passages that the apostle Paul would use in his letters to the Romans and to the Galatians to prove that sinners are made right with God not by anything they have worked for or earned, but rather by grace through faith in Christ alone. One of the greatest verses of all the Scripture that speaks of our salvation as being of faith alone and not as a result of works is Genesis 15:6. If you are not already familiar with this verse, then become familiar with it. There we read,

Then he [Abraham] believed in the LORD and He reckoned it to him as righteousness.

What did Abraham believe? He believed in the promises of God made in Genesis 12, 13 and again in the opening verses of chapter 15. Because of Abraham's faith in God's promises of what God said He would do, it was counted, considered, imputed to him as righteousness. What does this mean, that God "reckoned it to him as righteousness"? It means that Abraham was treated by God as if he was perfectly righteous. Notice that basis of this treatment was not because Abraham had always obeyed God but rather because he believed or trusted in God's promise. What verses 3-8 reveal is that Abraham left Ur and went to Canaan, trusting God's promise to provide a child, which God did in Isaac, whom he circumcised on the 8th day as God commanded. This all bears witness to the fact that he was right with God by faith in God's promise alone, not because of anything he did or did not do because at the moment God counted or reckoned Abraham as righteous, Abraham had not done anything. It was his faith in the grace of God that saved him. His "works" – the things Abraham did came after he believed and thus were not the cause of His salvation, but rather were the result of being saved. As the familiar saying goes; faith alone saves; but not the faith that is alone. Abraham believed in the promise of God to deliver him. Amazing, particularly when you stop to realize that he did not receive what was promised during his lifetime and yet he trusted God to do what he promised and acted in accord with that faith by living as a stranger and wanderer in Canaan and by circumcising all the males in his household.

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Let me stop here and address what may be a concern. I am talking about the faith of Abraham from verses 3-8 and yet Stephan does use this word even one time. He is not using the word, but clearly he is describing faith's effects to show the people that the message of the OT is not that God loves, accepts and rewards people with His presence and salvation on the basis of what they do; but rather on the basis of what He Himself promises to do for them who are helpless and hopeless. While this may sound a bit strange, what God promises to do for Abraham and his descendents actually reveals that faith itself has no power. What is faith? **Faith is dependence on God to powerfully do what God has promised to do.** Thus, faith is not an earning of God's favor because faith is actually the receiving of God's favor. Faith cannot be both an earning, a wage that is due to someone and at the same time a gracious gift. Abraham is seen to be dependent on God's faithfulness to His promises not upon his own performance of certain rituals or prayers or other religious acts.

Please turn with me over to Romans 4. What Stephen says in Acts 7:8, namely that God, **"gave him [Abraham] the covenant of circumcision..."** emphasizes the same thing Paul did Romans 4:4-5; 9-13. The argument of Paul in these verses is that faith is not a work that merits God's action, but that faith is a dependence on the action or work of God alone. Notice with me first verses 4-5,

4 Now to the one who works, his wage is not credited as a favor, but as what is due. 5 But to the one who does not work, but believes in Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is credited as righteousness,

If faith is a work, then God owes man something, but if faith is dependence upon the work of God alone, this is what brings saving righteousness to a person. And then in verses 9-13, what is faith, a work that saves, or a dependence upon God's promise to save? It is a dependence on God's promise to save. We read,

9 Is this blessing then on the circumcised, or on the uncircumcised also? For we say, "FAITH WAS CREDITED TO ABRAHAM AS RIGHTEOUSNESS." 10 How then was it credited? While he was circumcised, or uncircumcised? Not while circumcised, but while uncircumcised; 11 and he received the sign of circumcision, a seal of the righteousness of the faith which he had while uncircumcised, so that he might be the father of all who believe without being circumcised, that righteousness might be credited to them, 12 and the father of circumcision to those who not only are of the circumcision, but who also follow in the steps of the faith of our father Abraham which he had while uncircumcised. 13 For the promise to Abraham or to his descendants that he would be heir of the world was not through the Law [works; things I do], but through the righteousness of faith [dependence on what God does].

You see, God made promises to Abraham and Abraham believed those promises before he was circumcised. Abraham's circumcision of Isaac and the other male members of his household was done after God's promises, after he believed. Circumcision is a symbol of God's grace and Abraham's faith, not the cause of it. We need to be reminded how easy it is for us to believe that we are accepted by God because we perform certain religious acts. Circumcision did

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not save the Jews, God saves. Going to church does not save me; being faithful to my wife does not save me; being a good employee does not save me; reading my bible does not save me or make me anymore accepted by God. I am accepted by God on the basis of faith in what Christ alone has done. Everything else is a result of that, not the cause of it. For the Jews, the act or work of circumcision had become the cause of their salvation. However, it is quite clear in Stephen's words here and in Paul's commentary on these events that God's grace is received by faith alone and that circumcision is simply symbol or reminder of that grace.

Let us remember Stephen is summing up vast portions of Israel's history and yet he refers to very specific statements and events out of that history; things meant to make important theological points. One such statement seems almost out of place in our text, that of verse 6 when God tells Abraham that his descendants are going to horribly mistreated and enslaved for 400 years before they will come back to the land of Canaan. What kind of promise is this? And why would Stephen focus on this? Never forget that Stephen's audience would have been familiar with the whole context and promises of Genesis 15. What did God promise? He promised Abraham an innumerable number of descendants who will live in the land of Promise and become a blessing to all the world. This is the ultimate purpose of God's promise. But God also "promises" that before all this, his people would suffer as slaves for 400 years.

Stephen is making at least two points by referring to this suffering. **First, it is God's will that His people be enslaved and mistreated.** The people of God whom God has destined for glory are first destined for suffering. Somehow the Jewish leaders had equated suffering as not being in the will of God. These Jewish leaders were the first health and wealth preachers. Allow me to dramatize the point Stephen is communicating. In effect, he is saying, "You men who sit in the positions of power over the people; you killed Jesus and you are ready to kill me. Your desire is to destroy the church that has begun in the name of Jesus. You men assume that because you killed Jesus, He cannot be the promised Messiah because God would not have allowed His Messiah to suffer. You assume that because the church and its leaders seem so defenseless and feeble against them that God is against them; that they are wrong and you are in the right. However, Israel's own history reveals to us that God intentionally causes His people to suffer at times. Therefore, the suffering and death of Jesus as well as the persecution and death of Christians is no evidence that God is not with us but on the contrary, is an evidence that He is treating us the way He has always treated His people."

Beloved, the problem that religious people have is that they believe that God will always "do good" to the faithful. And so, if your life is good, it is because you are good, you have done something to warrant God's blessing. On the other hand, if your life is bad it is because you are bad. Yet God told Abraham that Israel would be enslaved for 400 years, revealing this to be God's will for His people and pointing out the error in the religious people's thinking. God, intentionally and for His own good purposes, allows the suffering of His people as evidenced by the fact that it was His will that Israel live as slaves in Egypt. That is the first thing Stephen's reference to Israel's slavery reveals.

The second thing this reference **reveals is the centrality of faith in God's promises, in God's power and in God's sovereign providence over all things.** We will either trust God or we will not. Yet we are called to live by faith, not by sight. Beloved, life will fall apart at times; difficulties will come, but for the person living by faith, these are no signs of God's displeasure or of God's reneging on His promises. God has promised that one day we will live in the ultimate

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“Land of Promise” – that is in heaven, with Him forever. God has never promised a trouble or pain free existence. What did Jesus say as recorded in John 16:33, **“In the world you have tribulation, [not you may have or will have] but take courage; I have overcome the world.”**

Just as for Israel, Egypt was not the Land of Promise; likewise these United States of America are not the Land of Promise. And so, like Abraham and like faithful Israel in Egypt, in the words of ^[slide 09] 2 Corinthians 4:18, **“...we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen; for the things which are seen are temporal, but the things which are not seen are eternal.”**

Therefore we are not to be discouraged by trouble and tribulation for we know that God has good purposes through it and we know that no matter what happens to us here and now, that we can never be separated from the love of God that has been promised to us in Jesus. The application for us is this; because we know that one day we will be with God forever in the eternal Land of Promise, we can live and endure by faith through the difficulties He allows in our lives until we get there.

So then, we have seen that God has always saved by grace alone and by faith alone. Finally, we come to see in the opening words of Stephen’s speech that God has always saved by Christ alone; by faith in Christ alone as our exalted Savior.

III. God has always saved His people through Christ alone (vv. 9-16)

9 The patriarchs became jealous of Joseph and sold him into Egypt. Yet God was with him, 10 and rescued him from all his afflictions, and granted him favor and wisdom in the sight of Pharaoh, king of Egypt, and he made him governor over Egypt and all his household. 11 Now a famine came over all Egypt and Canaan, and great affliction with it, and our fathers could find no food. 12 But when Jacob heard that there was grain in Egypt, he sent our fathers there the first time. 13 On the second visit Joseph made himself known to his brothers, and Joseph's family was disclosed to Pharaoh. 14 Then Joseph sent word and invited Jacob his father and all his relatives to come to him, seventy-five persons in all. 15 And Jacob went down to Egypt and there he and our fathers died. 16 From there they were removed to Shechem and laid in the tomb which Abraham had purchased for a sum of money from the sons of Hamor in Shechem.”

Coming then to verses 9-16, we see Stephen turn to Joseph and his relationship to his 10 brothers, the patriarchs as the subject. Why does he do this? I have every reason to believe the men listening to Stephen quickly understood Stephen’s point.

One of the first things Stephen says about Joseph is that he was betrayed and sold into the hands of the Gentiles by the patriarchs, the ruling heads of Israel. We read in verse 9, **“The patriarchs became jealous of Joseph and sold him into Egypt. Yet God was with him...”** Each man hearing Stephen’s words knew from which of those patriarchs he is descended. They openly and enthusiastically identify themselves with these brothers of Joseph. We find Stephen subtly comparing what the brothers had done to Joseph with what they had done to Jesus. Just as the brothers of Joseph betrayed him into the hands of the Gentiles, so too did these men betray their brother, Jesus, into the hands of the Gentiles.

But we learn that while the brothers wanted to be rid of Joseph and regarded as dead, God sovereignly and powerfully used this to exalted Joseph as lord of Egypt and head of Pharaoh’s house. The murderous hatred of the brothers did not destroy Joseph as they had desired, but

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became the very means through which God made Joseph a lord and savior of his people. Joseph summarized this well for his brothers later, after they had been reconciled, saying to them in Genesis 50:20,

As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good in order to bring about this present result, to preserve many people alive.

As Stephen stands before the Sanhedrin, this ruling council of Jewish brothers, he likens them to Joseph's brothers, intending harm and evil to Jesus, yet by their actions, God intended for the good of his people. While the Sanhedrin believed they were doing away with Jesus to the glory of God, God, to His glory, was accomplishing the salvation of all of His people through their murder of Jesus. For through this harm, through the crucifixion of Jesus, He revealed Himself to be the Lord and Savior of all His people.

Look with me at verse 13 and see that we are told here that Joseph revealed himself to his brothers on their second visit to Egypt. Let me remind you of the scene by reading Genesis 45:4-9

4 Then Joseph said to his brothers, "Please come closer to me." And they came closer. And he said, "I am your brother Joseph, whom you sold into Egypt. 5 "Now do not be grieved or angry with yourselves, because you sold me here, for God sent me before you to preserve life. 6 "For the famine has been in the land these two years, and there are still five years in which there will be neither plowing nor harvesting. 7 "God sent me before you to preserve for you a remnant in the earth, and to keep you alive by a great deliverance. 8 "Now, therefore, it was not you who sent me here, but God; and He has made me a father to Pharaoh and lord of all his household and ruler over all the land of Egypt. 9 "Hurry and go up to my father, and say to him, 'Thus says your son Joseph, "God has made me lord of all Egypt; come down to me, do not delay.

As Stephen reminds the men of this scene, it is as if Jesus Himself is pleading with them to recognize and trust Him so that they may be saved. Stephen is telling them who Jesus really is, their brother sent by God that they might recognize Christ alone as their Savior. Jesus is the one they betrayed and He alone is the one now who can save them because of what God accomplished through their betrayal.

Stephen is clearly revealing to them that if they were to refuse Jesus, it would be as if Joseph's brothers had refused to acknowledge Joseph and to bring Jacob down to Egypt. For if they had refused, then those 75 Israelites would have remained in Canaan and they would have died. These brothers had to have faith in Joseph, the brother they betrayed. They had to come to Joseph and depend upon his provision alone if they were to be saved. And in like manner, the Jewish leaders had to leave behind their attachment to temple and law and land and come to Jesus, the one they had betrayed, yet also the one who stands ready to receive them if they will come to Him by faith.

By way of application, may I ask you, "How often have each of us betrayed Jesus?" How often do we look to our own performance, habits or customs of moral or religious duties rather than the provision of Christ alone? How often do we set Jesus aside as the sole object of our

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affection and rather choose those things as gods which are not gods at all. How often do we pursue our own pleasures rather than the pleasures of Christ?

The point of our text is that Jesus has reveals Himself to us as the one we have betrayed; yet He is also the one whom God has exalted so that He may be our Savior and Lord. This morning and indeed daily, Jesus calls us not to fear Him who could rightly put us to death, but rather to draw near to Him and to allow Him care for and to save us. The truth is that we will perish if we hold onto the things that are currently giving us pleasure if we have not given ourselves wholly unto Him. May we not be like these stubborn, obstinate, and stiff-necked men, whom, as we will come to see, prefer their own self-made, delusional righteousness, their own perverted view of reality, and their own lifestyles that put God in a box, refusing to forsake it all; refusing to put away pride so that they may come to their rejected Brother, Jesus Christ, that they may be saved. Jesus will not refuse any who come to Him and depend upon Him in faith to fulfill all the promises God has made to His people. Let us remember that God has always and only saved His people by grace alone, by faith alone, through Christ alone. Are you looking to these things alone in your walk with God?

Soli Deo Gloria

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