

Resolved to Live – As a Witness for Jesus

“...about all that Jesus began to do and teach” (Acts 1:1).

R₂L – Resolved to Live: The Crisis That Almost Crippled the Church

Acts 15:1-12 (Part 2)

15:1 Some men came down from Judea and began teaching the brethren, “Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.” 2 And when Paul and Barnabas had great dissension and debate with them, the brethren determined that Paul and Barnabas and some others of them should go up to Jerusalem to the apostles and elders concerning this issue. 3 Therefore, being sent on their way by the church, they were passing through both Phoenicia and Samaria, describing in detail the conversion of the Gentiles, and were bringing great joy to all the brethren. 4 When they arrived at Jerusalem, they were received by the church and the apostles and the elders, and they reported all that God had done with them. 5 But some of the sect of the Pharisees who had believed stood up, saying, “It is necessary to circumcise them and to direct them to observe the Law of Moses.” 6 The apostles and the elders came together to look into this matter. 7 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. 8 And God, who knows the heart, testified to them giving them the Holy Spirit, just as He also did to us; 9 and He made no distinction between us and them, cleansing their hearts by faith. 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? 11 But we believe that we are saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, in the same way as they also are.” 12 All the people kept silent, and they were listening to Barnabas and Paul as they were relating what signs and wonders God had done through them among the Gentiles.

Last week we look at this passage noting that some men, not even identified now as prophets or teachers, but some men had come down from Judea and they introduced a teaching to the church there in Antioch that was in stark opposition to what Paul and Barnabas had been teaching on their first missionary journey. You might recall that Paul was preaching the gospel to the Gentiles, taking good news of salvation, of forgiveness and acceptance with God through just one thing, that is faith in the person and work of Jesus Christ. The message of Paul consistent of a handful of truths that we glean not only from the book of Acts, but also from Paul’s letters to the churches, letter we know as the New Testament Epistles. What was Paul’s teaching? Paul taught that people have a problem called sin, that all miss God’s mark and standard of holiness (Romans 3:23). In order for us to enter heaven and to enjoy fellowship with this holy God, he must be as perfect as God is perfect (Matthew 5:48; Revelation 21:7). At issue, there is not one who is this perfect or righteous (Romans 3:10). And so, in love and mercy, God the Father sent His Son, the Lord Jesus, to earth (John 3:16). Jesus lived a perfect life, never sinning once because He was sinless. And so, when He died on the Cross, He paid or suffered, not for His sins, because He had none, but the Bible says that He suffered for the sins of His people; for all our sins (1 Peter 3:18; 1 John 2:2) and then offers us His perfection and His righteousness, so that we might have fellowship with Him and the Father in heaven (1 Corinthians 1:30). And what must we do to receive this life changing righteousness of Christ. We must believe these things to be so; we must believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, that He did come to accomplish and actually did accomplish all these things. If we would but trust Him, His words and actions, if we would surrender our lives to Him as Lord and Savior, (Philippians 3:9; Romans 4:1-5; Ephesians 2:8-

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9). The message of Paul was that faith alone in Christ alone brings salvation; and the simple equation of salvation, that goes against humanity’s general sense of needing to attain something, is purely and properly according to the unearned, unmerited grace of God (Ephesians 2:8-9). It is this manifestation of God’s grace to undeserving sinners that reflects the glory of God, which is what we read about in Ephesians 1:5-8a

5 He predestined us to adoption as sons through Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the kind intention of His will, 6 to the praise of the glory of His grace, which He freely bestowed on us in the Beloved. 7 In Him we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of His grace 8 which He lavished on us.

This is the message that Paul preached to the Gentiles. We see it in summary form in Acts 13:39, **“and through Him [Jesus Christ] everyone who believes is freed from all things, from which you could not be freed through the Law of Moses.”** In other words, it is not what we can do in keeping some standard of holiness established by God that saves, but rather in believing that someone, namely Jesus, has kept that standard for you and that through such a belief, a person is freed; not freed to sin; but freed to serve God. This was the message of Paul.

But, you remember, these false teachers came into the church and they introduced something that sounded a bit similar, but with just enough of a twist to make it man-oriented rather than Jesus fulfilled. Notice in verse one their teaching saying, **“Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.”** This was their argument. Faith in Jesus is needful; it is most important indeed, but believing in Jesus as having taken care of everything for salvation; well, that is just not enough; there is something that man must accomplish in order to be saved and have the hope of eternal life. And what is that something? That something is to be circumcised according to the custom of Moses. This was their argument; that unless the Gentiles first became Jewish, they could truly become Christians. But it got worse than that people. For not only did they teach that in order to be saved they must first become Jewish, they had to jump through this hoop of initiation, but notice in verse 5 how the argument gets expanded when they said, **“It is necessary to circumcise them and to direct them to observe the Law of Moses.”** Not only was Jesus not enough to get Gentiles saved initially, but Jesus was also not enough to keep them saved as they would also have to keep all the ceremonial laws of holiness, the washing and sacrifices, as prescribed in the Old Testament law. This law keeping addition to the gospel of grace was the subject of the book of Hebrews where the author there points his readers constantly back to the sufficiency of Christ not only to save once for all; but also to save completely and eternally as Hebrews 7:25-27 indicates:

25 Therefore He is able also to save forever those who draw near to God through Him, since He always lives to make intercession for them. 26 For it was fitting for us to have such a high priest, holy, innocent, undefiled, separated from sinners and exalted above the heavens; 27 who does not need daily, like those high priests, to offer up sacrifices, first for His own sins and then for the sins of the people, because this He did once for all when He offered up Himself.

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Now, that was the argument made by these men in favor of believing in faith in Christ, plus man’s efforts and attainments both purchase and keep a person’s salvation. You have heard me speak a bit by why of how this contrasted with the teaching of Paul. So now, let us hear the apology of Peter, the spokesman of the apostles.

II. The Apology of Peter (Acts 15:7-11)

And 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 should hear the word of the gospel and believe.

Did you catch the loaded statement? **“And after there had been much debate”**-- this would have been better than any CSPAN coverage of debate between political parties. Please notice that the Christians were serious enough about the truth to debate for it! To them, unity around the truth was more important than unity based upon misrepresentations of God, of Christ and of salvation. There is nothing wrong with standing up for the truth. We are called to defend the faith! The problem is that we tend to defend opinions, traditions and feelings rather than the truth of God’s Word. Let me ask you, when is the last time that you debated, you gave a thoughtful, thorough defense of the faith? When Peter wrote those familiar words of 1 Peter 3:15, saying, **“but sanctify Christ as Lord in your hearts, always being ready to make a defense [an argument, an apology for the faith] to everyone who asks you to give an account for the hope that is in you...”** to whom was he speaking? Theologians? Pastors and Teachers? No, he was writing to Christians, young and old, new in the faith and seasoned in the faith. You are called to defend the truth concerning Scripture. And yet we tend to flap our jaws and argue about anything and everything except what is truly important, God’s Word. We need, you need to be a better student of the Word so that you can better defend the truth of God’s Word to others.

So in verse 7 we read, **“Peter stood up and said...”** After the issue had been fully debated; apostles, like judges after hearing testimony from both sides, proceed to give their rendering on the case. And what did Peter do? He reminded everyone there of his own experience with Cornelius (a Gentile) and the fellow Gentiles in his household a few years before; of how God had chosen Peter to take the gospel to these Gentiles with the result that they had believed. You might remember that even before Peter finished his sermon at the home of Cornelius, the Holy Spirit came upon them, and they, these Gentiles, began speaking in unlearned foreign languages, just as the Jews had done at the Day of Pentecost; something that was to tell Peter and all the Jews that the Gentiles were being saved in the same manner as they Jews had, by faith alone in Christ. Before they could be circumcised; before they could be instructed in the Law, they were saved. In Acts 10:43, Peter gave this testimony:

Of Him [Jesus] all the prophets bear witness that through His name [not through His name and the Law; or through His name and circumcision; or through His name and personal merits or good works; but that through His name] everyone who believes in Him receives forgiveness of sins.

How much clearer must it be! Peter declares that the ONLY thing these Gentiles must do to be saved is BELIEVE! Peter returns to this theme in Acts 15:5-9 saying,

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“8 And God, who knows the heart, bore witness to them, giving them the Holy Spirit, just as He also did to us; 9 and He made no distinction between us and them, cleansing their hearts [not by ceremonial cleansings or animal sacrifices, or attending the right church, or even by being baptized...but] by faith.

Let us not miss the point being made here. It is God who knows the heart of all men. It is God who bore witness to them that even while they were uncircumcised, and apart from the Law, He had cleansed their hearts how...? By faith alone. And by faith alone God had given to them His own Holy Spirit in the same way and with the same signs as He had previously done to the Jews who believed.

When Peter said in verse 9 that God **“made no distinction between us and them”** he revealed something insightful. God had set Peter up for this moment. Remember Peter’s vision of the clean and unclean animals back in Acts 10. There God taught Peter this truth when he said; **“God has shown me that I should not call any man unholy or unclean”** (Acts 10:28). The Pharisees believed that the Gentiles were inherently “unholy” and thus “unclean,” and had to be made holy and clean by coming to Christianity by first coming through the door of Judaism.

Peter’s defense, his apology here is this; *that God would not give His Holy Spirit to those who were unholy or unclean in their hearts.* And so, the very fact that God had sent His Holy Spirit on the Gentiles, as they believed, apart from their being circumcised, clearly revealed to everyone that salvation is by faith alone, not by faith plus circumcision or some other act of keeping the law. Peter’s concern was this, that if God Himself bore witness to the salvation of the Gentiles based solely upon their faith, how could anyone impose anything else upon them for their salvation? Since God had not made any distinctions between these new Gentile believers who were not circumcised or keeping the law and those Jews who came to faith while keeping the law, how could this council make any distinctions or make any demands?

In the salvation of Cornelius, a Gentile, back in Acts 10, we have both a precedent and a pattern of how people are saved. They are saved through faith in the person and work of Christ alone. This is all that was necessary for a Gentile to be saved and Peter states this in Acts 15:10 saying,

“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?”

It is interesting that Peter said **“why do you put God to the test.”** In other words, the argument of the men who said it was faith plus keeping the law was calling into question the judgment of God. It is God who knows the hearts of men. It was God who knew that Cornelius and others in his household had been forgiven and cleansed from their sins by His grace alone. So now, to insist that Gentiles must be circumcised or keep the law that even the Jews could not keep in order to be saved; this was to invalidate God’s approval of them when He gave them His Holy Spirit. And beloved, listen well, to say then that we must add to the work of Christ on the cross anything of ourselves, is to invalidate the words of Christ who said, **“It is finished!”** (John 19:30). It is to invalidate the death and resurrection of Christ so as to say, “God did most everything, Jesus is mostly enough, but I need a little bit of me in there!” When Peter used the

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work “**yoke**” there in verse 10, he used a term that signified being under the Mosaic Law. Paul said something similar to the churches of Galatia in Galatians 5:1...

It was for freedom that Christ set us free; therefore keep standing firm and do not be subject again to a yoke [to the burden or law] of slavery.

We have both Peter and Paul speaking of being under the Law of Moses as being under the yoke of bondage. In fact, the phrase, “*taking on the yoke*” was precisely what Gentile converts to Judaism, back before Christ came, were described as doing when they ritually bathed themselves and were circumcised. To counter this, notice what Peter said in 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.

We often refer to this chapter as the first church council, the Jerusalem Council. That may be a bit misleading as it was not as though conference delegates were called in. It was simply that Paul and Barnabas came from Antioch to Jerusalem to discuss the question of the relationship of human works to the salvation of the Gentiles. In actuality, it was the predominately Gentile Church of Antioch trying to be in unity with the more Jewish Church of Jerusalem.

But the result of this meeting did produce a creed, a statement of faith. Did you catch it? Peter begins verse 11 with what phrase? “**We believe...**” We use this phrase every Sunday as we read our Affirmation of Faith. “*We believe...*” Now, when Peter said it, he was acting as spokesmen for the apostles. He was saying in effect, “we apostles and elders have come to this conclusion.” Listen again to the affirmation of faith there in verse 11, “***But we believe that we are saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, in the same way as they also are.***” This was simply Peter’s way of saying that the leadership of the Jerusalem church was in agreement with Paul and Barnabas, the delegation of the Antioch Church, that salvation is wholly and only by grace. Because if we are saved by what “we” do, then we cannot say that we are saved by grace, but rather by a big-hearted God who gives us a second chance to prove ourselves worthy.

Acts 15:11 is a remarkable thing for any Jew to say... ***But we believe that we are saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, in the same way as they also are.*** Here he equates religious Jews with pagan Gentiles and the common denominator is what? “Grace”! The word “grace” means: “free and unmerited favor” and in context it speak of the unearned favor of God shown to guilty sinners who deserve only His wrath and punishment for sin. Human merit plays no part in man’s salvation. Notice how Paul stresses this idea of “grace” in Romans 3:24 when he wrote that believers are...

... justified as a gift by His grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus

The word “justified” means: “to declare righteous.” It a legal act on the part of a judge, in this case God. And what is the basis upon which God declares guilty sinners as right or righteous? Is it because of something He saw in them? Is it because of some spark of goodness in them? Paul says it is “***as a gift by His grace.***” The word “gift” is the Greek is actually an adverb describing how we are justified. Literally we are justified “freely,” or “without a cause on

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our part.” The cause of our justification, of being right with God, is in God and not in us. When we read this statement, “**as a gift by His grace**” we read a redundancy, as both gift and grace reveal that a person being made right with God is all of God. Nothing in this act of justification belongs to, or proceeds from man. Romans 11:6 makes this abundantly clear saying,

But if it is by grace, it is no longer on the basis of works, otherwise grace is no longer grace.

What both Paul was saying, along with Peter in Acts 15:11 is this, *that God’s grace and human effort in salvation are mutually exclusive*. They cannot coexist. Now we do not have time to deal with the inevitable argument that this must mean a person can live however he wants, can continue to sin because I said that his salvation is not dependent upon his efforts. It is true, a person’s salvation is not secured or kept by man’s efforts; but the fact that a person has been saved by God *is always reflected in what he does* so that I can say to you that grace that does not affect one’s behavior is not saving grace. So, back to our Acts text. How did the people respond to Peter’s apology? Well, in verse 12 we see...

III. The Awe of the Congregation (Acts 15:12)

And all the multitude kept silent, and they were listening to Barnabas and Paul as they were relating what signs and wonders God had done through them among the Gentiles.

There is something interesting to see here. For some time now Luke has referred to Paul and Barnabas, in that order. But here Luke reverts to the old order of these two names. Barnabas would be seen as the established, respected member of the Church at Antioch (4:36-37; 11:22). It was Barnabas who took the lead in relating what he and Paul had experienced in ministering to Gentiles.

But it was Peter’s words that had silenced the congregation. Peter stated the facts and then Paul and Barnabas confirmed his statement. God had validated all that Paul and Barnabas had preached and experienced via the signs and wonders which He granted them. These signs and wonders were God’s “Amen” to their message and ministry. We might note that God does not get involved in confirming false doctrine with signs and wonders. Consider...Paul and Barnabas were traveling from town to town preaching a salvation by grace alone through faith alone. As Barnabas and Paul testify that their message was confirmed by God via the signs and wonders, what do the Judaizers offer in our text? Nothing!

What do we learn through all of this? We ought to be in awe and faithfully acknowledge that the gospel requires nothing more than personal faith in the substitutionary death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus, the Messiah, in the sinner’s place, resulting in the forgiveness of sins, the imputation or giving to us of the righteousness of Christ, and thus the hope of eternal life.

I know that the idea of “free grace” is difficult for people to grasp. We are programmed to get or not get something for a reason in ourselves. Thus, salvation by faith alone; of faith plus nothing seems impossible. But the gospel is this, that people may be saved and can be saved on the grounds of Christ’s perfect work alone. The Bible is so clear in this teaching that a person is saved by God’s grace, through faith plus nothing, that none can refute it. What is refuted is what does grace mean or that faith must be the human contribution to salvation. But the bible simply teaches we are saved by grace through faith, yet people want to add things.

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And this is no little matter. Beloved, we can be off a bit on our understanding of how the Holy Spirit uses gifts in the church. We can be off a bit in our eschatology, the study of end times. We can be off a bit on our understanding of a few difficult passages of Scripture. But if we mess up on the doctrine of salvation; if we mess up on the essence of the gospel; then we are simply messed up! But there are many out there who claim to be Christians yet they have added works to their faith, which places their faith not totally on Christ, but also in themselves.

So we have the early church struggling over the doctrine of salvation by grace alone through faith alone. Yet they came to the biblical conclusion. And guess what, that struggle will continue in every generation of the church because we want to be loved because of what we do for God. Will you praise God for His saving you completely through the Lord Jesus Christ? If you think you must wait, if you must clean up your act in some way before you come to Christ, you will never come at all. Repent of such thinking and give yourself to the saving grace of Jesus. And believer's, let us be careful not to add or even give the impression that we, because we are now made righteous and attend church and know some Bible verses, that we have contributed to our salvation. No beloved, we do not add to our salvation, we should simply be concerned that our God-granted salvation is being revealed, lived out for others to see and know that God salvation changes everything.

Soli Deo Gloria

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