SAVED BY GRACE

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 last week’s passage, we studied Paul’s first missionary journey that took him through Cyprus, Syria and Cilicia in what is now South Central Turkey. On this journey, Paul and Barnabas encountered strong opposition from the Jews to the message of the gospel. But many Gentiles opened their hearts to the gospel message, which welcomed them as children of God through the redeeming blood of Jesus Christ, shed for their sins. And God reinforced their message by sending the Holy Spirit to enable Paul and Barnabas to do many miraculous signs and wonders. God was pleased with their shepherd heart to embrace all kinds of people as brothers in Christ, and he helped them to raise up churches of faithful believers in all the towns that they visited. God also enabled them to endure all the opposition they faced, including stoning, and carry out their mission to the end. From this passage we were amazed to see that the Christian church did not arise in a quiet suburban community. It arose in the midst of a violent spiritual conflict that promised hardship and trials to those who believed. But this did not scare away the early believers. Rather, they understood through the good example of Paul and Barnabas that we must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God. May God give the Christian church of this generation the same hope, and the same conviction. In today’s passage, the spiritual battle begun by Paul and Barnabas in the mission fields of Syria and Asia opens a new front in the home church of Jerusalem. In essence, the battle was over the cross of Christ. Let’s study how the cross of Jesus challenged the Judaistic ideas of the Jerusalem church, and how the church leaders put the word of God and God’s world salvation purpose ahead of their own prejudices and political advantage. As we have learned from recent events, history is not an abstract exercise, or a series of dates and events. History is the arena in which God’s world salvation purpose is being played out. May God help us to meditate deeply on this passage, until we can learn the spiritual principles that will enable today’s church to make courageous decisions which advance God’s
purpose and history ahead of our own self-interests. Most importantly, may God help us to know that Americans, Russians, Chinese and Arabians are saved by grace alone.

I. Grace under fire

First, enemies of the cross. As we have studied, the Antioch church was the first church that began sharing the gospel with Gentiles. When the church at Jerusalem first heard about this, they were glad, and they prayerfully chose Barnabas, a man of encouragement and the universality of God’s love, to go and see this work of God. What a blessing their prayerful administration of God’s work was! Through Barnabas’ gentle encouragement, the Gentile believers were strengthened in their faith, and many more turned to the Lord Jesus. Barnabas also brought Paul, the most excellent Bible teacher, and together they taught the church the Bible and raised up leaders from many nations of Africa, Asia and Europe. It was at Antioch, not Jerusalem, that the church first began to obey Jesus’ world mission command, not through accident or necessity, but out of love for God and obedience to God’s command. The leaders, under the direction of the Holy Spirit, sent out Paul and Barnabas to proclaim the message of the gospel to the Gentile nations of Cyprus and Galatia. The Antioch church was alive in the history of God’s world salvation work. The Antioch church was bearing much spiritual fruit, and its members were filled with joy because of the grace of God which had made them the center of world mission work at that time. The Antioch church was filled with Christian koinonia that enabled Jews and Gentiles to eat together, in spite of centuries of cultural misunderstanding and even hatred. What a great work of God was going on in the Antioch church. Maybe, the members of the Antioch felt like they were living in paradise because of God’s abundant blessings and grace.

Unfortunately for the Antioch church, they did not live in a vacuum. They lived in a world ruled by sin and Satan. And Satan quickly sent his agents to spy out on the freedom that the Antioch church enjoyed (Gal. 2:4). Look at verse 1. “Some men came down from Judea to Antioch and were teaching the brothers: ‘Unless you are circumcised, according to the custom taught by Moses, you cannot be saved.’” These men were members of the Jewish church, and at the same time, they were members of the party of the Pharisees, the
dominant sect of Judaism at that time. The Pharisees had been bitter enemies of Jesus of Nazareth during his earthly messianic ministry, largely because of his teaching that it is right to do good works on the Sabbath, violating the strict traditions regarding Sabbath rest advocated by the Pharisees. Many Pharisees had joined in condemning Jesus to death at the Sanhedrin council meeting. But many, like Nicodemus, secretly believed in Jesus, and opposed the council’s actions. After Jesus’ death on the cross and resurrection, many among the party of the Pharisees believed that Jesus was the Christ, and joined the believers in Jerusalem. The Pharisees, who had become enemies of God due to their love of tradition, could enjoy God’s marvelous grace of forgiveness of their sins, and a living hope in the kingdom of God through Jesus’ death on the cross. When they experienced the grace of forgiveness, they could repent of their worldly desires, and live in the light of Jesus’ love and truth. The Pharisees were ok, as long as they were among other Jews. But the news that the gospel was being preached to Gentiles was troubling to them. They were unhappy when Peter went into Cornelius the centurion’s home. They were even more troubled when they heard that Jews and Gentiles were living and eating together in the Antioch church. Some of them became so disturbed that they decided to go down to Antioch and proclaim to the Gentile believers: “Unless you are circumcised, according to the custom taught by Moses, you cannot be saved.”

These false brothers justified themselves by using the name of Moses. But these men were not servants of God or defenders of Moses. They had become agents of Satan because of their jealousy toward Gentile believers. They deliberately forgot that their terrible sins of murdering the Son of God had been washed away by the precious blood of Jesus shed on the cross. They deliberately forgot that God had humbled himself to the point of dying, dying on the cross, in order to free them from their sins and enable them to live for righteousness. Instead, they saw that it was by the cross of Jesus that Gentile sinners, who only a few years back were wallowing in the mud, feeding pigs, were set to enter the kingdom of God ahead of them! The devil channeled into their hearts through their self-righteousness, and used them to attack the faith and confidence of the Gentile believers. They called on Gentiles to become Jews first, and submit to the law of Moses, to make their salvation in Jesus sure. Because of their bad
influence, Jewish brothers began to distance themselves from the Gentiles, and the vessel of the Holy Spirit which had been formed and used so powerfully by God when the Antioch church believed and practiced the grace of God, was beginning to crack and fall apart.

In every age, there has been no shortage of those who became the tools of the devil through their self-righteousness and opposition to the grace of God given to all men through the cross of Christ. Though they call themselves Christians, they are no better than the terrorists of Bin Laden, who set themselves up as keepers of the one true righteousness, while violating their own standards to accomplish their goals. When UBF came to America in 1975, many Christian leaders were shocked that American students would study the Bible with Korean Bible teachers. They saw how Korean students, who came from the best Universities of Korea, humbled themselves and served American students with Bible study and delicious Korean food. But they did not see it as the evidence of the grace of God in the hearts of these Korean students. Instead, they smelled their fermented cabbage and scowled. Instead, they called their servantship mind-control, and throwing “love bombs.” God really wants Christians from all nations, all cultures, all classes to be one. Jesus, in his prayer in the upper room on the night of his arrest, called on his disciples to be one, as he and the Father are one. How can all believers, who come from rich families and poor, from desert nations and forested nations, from north and from south, east and west, be one? Jesus said, “For them, I sanctify myself, that they might be truly sanctified” (Jn 17:19). Christian unity is possible only through the grace of God made known to us through Jesus’ sacrifice as the Lamb of God for our sins. For this reason, the devil attacks our faith in the grace of our Lord Jesus most of all. And the devil really hates the Christian fellowship that preaches and practices the grace of God and the world mission command.

Second, defenders of the cross. Look at verse 2. “This brought Paul and Barnabas into sharp dispute and debate with them. So Paul and Barnabas were appointed, along with some other believers, to go up to Jerusalem to see the apostles and elders about this question.” The message of grace was under attack. The cross of Jesus was being dragged down and the cross of circumcision and legalism was being raised up in its place. But God was not caught unaware. He had already raised up his servant, Paul, to be a light for the Gentiles (Acts
13:47). Paul said of this struggle in Galatians 2:5, “We did not give in to them for a moment, so that the truth of the gospel might remain with you.” At this critical time, Paul stood up as a defender of the cross of Christ and the grace of God that is for all men who believe. And the church at Antioch turned to the apostles and elders of the church at Jerusalem for direction and support.

II. “It is the grace of our Lord Jesus...”

When Paul and Barnabas arrived at Jerusalem, a council of the apostles and elders was called. Paul and Barnabas made an initial report of what God had been doing among the Gentiles through them. Then, members of the party of the Pharisees stood up and made their claim that Christians must become Jews first, and then Christians. There was a lot of discussion. How could this issue be solved? From the council’s deliberations, we see that there were three testimonies introduced which enabled the church to reach a unanimous conclusion regarding this question. From each of these testimonies, we learn that the grace of God is truly for all people of all nations. What is more, we learn from the council’s deliberation the principle for making a spiritual decision in God.

First, “It is God’s choice.” The first to stand up and introduce relevant testimony was Simon Peter, Jesus’ top disciple and the spiritual leader of the Jerusalem church. Peter recounted the story of how God had led him and Cornelius, a Roman centurion, to meet in Caesarea, where Peter gave Cornelius and his household the message of the gospel. Look at verse 7b. “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.” Here Peter reminds the Jerusalem church of a basic fact. God is living. God is not an abstract entity about whom we have theoretical arguments. The living God made a choice to have Peter share the gospel with Cornelius and his friends, and for all those who heard and believed to receive the Holy Spirit. Look at verses 8 and 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.” God’s choice to accept the Gentiles just as he had accepted the apostles on the day of Pentecost was shocking to Peter. It was even more shocking to the other Jewish believers present. But
they did not insist on their own idea or preference. They acknowledged that it was God’s choice to accept the Gentiles. Then Peter and the others accepted them, too, by baptizing them in the name of Jesus Christ. The Pharisees had good theoretical arguments about why the Gentiles were unacceptable to God. But to insist on those arguments in the face of the living God’s choosing was testing God. It was to become God’s enemy with regard to God’s world salvation purpose. Look at verse 10. “Now then, why do you put on the necks of the disciples a yoke that neither we nor our fathers have been able to bear?” Self-righteousness is a burden and hindrance to others. Finally, it leads us to come under God’s judgment. Look at verse 11. “No! We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved, just as they are.” Sinful human beings want to pick and choose who receives God’s grace and who doesn’t. But Christians acknowledge God’s choice to make the grace of salvation available to everyone who comes to the cross of Jesus, repents of his sins and accepts him as Lord and Savior. Those who oppose God’s choice become enemies of God and enemies of the cross of Christ.

Second, The gift of the Holy Spirit. According to Peter’s testimony, God made his choice known through the giving of the Holy Spirit to the Gentiles at Cornelius’ house. It was one event, and could have been considered to be the exception, not the rule. However, Paul and Barnabas then began to tell the council in greater detail how God had made his choice of reaching out to the Gentiles known through their ministry. In spite of fierce opposition and Gentile ignorance of God, God was with Barnabas and Paul to lead Gentiles to faith in Jesus as Lord and Savior of the world. Acts 14:3 says, “So Paul and Barnabas spent considerable time there, speaking boldly for the Lord, who confirmed the message of his grace by enabling them to do miraculous signs and wonders.” The entire council was silent as Paul and Barnabas introduced one evidence after another that God’s choice to call the Gentiles to himself was real and persistent.

Third, The word of the prophets agree. James was the Bible teacher for the Jerusalem church. He was also known as a warrior of prayer, whose knees were harder than a camel’s because of his constant kneeling in prayer. As James heard the testimony of Peter and then Paul and Barnabas, the front line generals of Jesus’ church, he recalled the testimony of Scripture. Look at verses 16 and 17. “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.” This verse is a quotation from Amos 9:11-12. This Scripture reveals that God’s heart is for everyone to believe and be saved. The Scripture confirmed that God’s heart for world salvation was not a new thing. Rather, God has been looking forward to the day when, through his Son’s sacrifice on the cross for men’s sins, all men could be gathered into his kingdom. God’s heart is not like man’s heart. God’s heart for the world is as broad as the summer sea, and as deep as the oceans. God’s longing for righteousness among men is not satisfied when men perform heroic feats in battle or restrict themselves through legalistic rituals. God’s will will be done when all men everywhere know the grace of God that is revealed in the cross of Jesus, where God’s Son’s holy blood was poured out onto the ground as the ransom sacrifice for our sins.

In light of this testimony, the church came to a unanimous decision that the Gentiles needed to respect their Jewish brothers’ practices and most of all to learn the holiness of God, but that they could not and should not be expected to become Jews. They were welcomed into the brotherhood of man as they were. The church appointed Judas and Silas to deliver the letter, and the church at Antioch was greatly encouraged by its message. The Jerusalem church lost its chance to be the historic centerpiece of the Christian church. But their decision to honor the Gentile believers was like that of a kernel of wheat that falls to the ground and dies. It would produce much fruit and give glory to Jesus, our Savior King. It also encouraged Paul and Barnabas and the entire Antioch church to wholeheartedly share the gospel among the Gentiles everywhere.

Today we learned that we must watch out for the enemies of the cross of Christ. They proclaim salvation by works and practice a kind of self-righteousness that gives them an appearance of holiness. But we must not be fooled. The only righteousness available to men everywhere is the righteousness that is by faith in the Son. May God help us to fight the enemies of the cross by preaching and practicing God’s grace of world salvation work in this generation. May God give us grace to make decisions based on God’s choice, and not our own.