

BY GOD'S GRACE ALONE

Acts 15:1-35 (Key Verse: 11)

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

In today's passage we are going to learn about salvation. How can we be saved from the power of sin and death? How can we have hope and assurance of the kingdom of heaven? During the early Christian church times, some Jewish believers were convinced that unless Gentiles fulfill the Jewish customs such as circumcision according to the law of Moses like them, they cannot be saved. How about today? Do we have some customs, conditions, or qualifications that we think are necessary for one to fulfill first to be saved? In today's passage we are going to learn that we are saved only through the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ. I pray that God may be with us all today, grant us humble hearts to receive one word, to put our trust in the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ and overcome the temptation of adding something else like our own customs to the Grace.

The passage begins with certain men who came down to Antioch from Judea. They began teaching the gentile believers saying: *"Unless you are circumcised, according to the custom taught by Moses, you cannot be saved."* Hearing these brought Paul and Barnabas into a sharp dispute and debate with them. Why did Paul and Barnabas have this sharp dispute and debate with them? Actually, the topic of circumcision is not something that these men made up, but rather something that God had commanded to Abraham in **Genesis 17:10-11** saying: *"This is my covenant with you and your descendants after you, the covenant you are to keep: Every male among you shall be circumcised. 11 You are to undergo circumcision, and it will be the sign of the covenant between me and you."* So we can say that these men really came to the gentiles with an intention to help them. However, the issue that Paul and Barnabas had was that these men put circumcision as a condition for salvation, they said: *"...you cannot be saved."* Saying these was somehow problematic, firstly because it contradicted the gospel, the gentile believers came to the faith when they heard the gospel of Jesus Christ. In **John 3:16** it says: *"For 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."* When the gentiles heard this, they believed and were filled with so much joy, they became great men of faith, Antioch became a missionary sending center only because of this gospel message.

And now when the men from Judea brought the issue of circumcision, they challenged and implied that Jesus is not sufficient. It suggested that for the Gentile believers to be saved, they first must become a Jew and then Jesus can work. Secondly, what the men from Judea said had great potential to discourage the gentile believers by putting a burden on them to fulfill the law. In **verse 10** it says: *"Now then, why do you try to test God by putting on the necks of Gentiles a yoke that neither we nor our ancestors have been able to bear?"* The law had already been so difficult to fulfill among the Jews, in fact many of the Jews were driven away from God by the Jewish leaders, in that they put so much emphasis on the law causing so much burden on the people. Furthermore, focusing on the law was problematic in that it could turn the gentile believers into Pharisees-like, with a toxic mindset thinking they can earn salvation by works.

Because of these potential problems, Paul and Barnabas, entered into a dispute and debate with the men from Judea to protect the faith of the gentile believers and also to teach the men from Judea that Jesus alone is sufficient. After much debate, the men from Judea still did not agree with Paul and Barnabas. And so, the church in Antioch appointed both Paul and Barnabas, along with some other believers to go up to Jerusalem to see the apostles and elders about this matter. The church made this decision because the matter in question was so important and at the core of the Christian faith. Our Christian faith is all about salvation, and so it was important that this matter is settled and that all people have a clear understanding and direction.

When Paul and Barnabas set out for Jerusalem, together with some other believers they spread the news about the great work of God, how the Gentiles have converted to the faith. They spread this news as they travelled through Phoenicia and Samaria, and when the believers heard this, they were very glad. Likewise, when they arrived in Jerusalem, they shared the same news, how God worked through them among the gentiles. As they were sharing this news with the elders and the apostles, the question of circumcision came up again. Let us look at **verse 5**: *“Then some of the believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees stood up and said, “The Gentiles must be circumcised and required to keep the law of Moses.””* The party of the Pharisees, just like the men from Judea who went down to Antioch requested that the gentiles must be circumcised and are required to keep the law of Moses. Again, these men implied that Jesus is not sufficient to save the gentiles, they first must become Jews. From this we can see that the question of salvation was not just an issue of the Church in Antioch, but rather a global issue, for even in Jerusalem it was an issue.

Even today, the matter of salvation is misunderstood and polluted, sometimes because of this misunderstanding and pollution many people are driven away from the faith. Like the Jewish believers, hard laws are pressed on our people today creating barriers which hinder people from receiving salvation. Why such barriers? Is it because the grace in our Lord Jesus seems too simple or too good to be true? We think perhaps it is necessary to add something to it. Paul and Barnabas insisted that this very grace is sufficient, while Jewish believers maintained that circumcision is necessary. And so the matter was put to the attention of the elders and the apostle in Jerusalem to resolve. Now how did they resolve the matter?

Let us look at **verse 7**: *“After much discussion, Peter got up and addressed them: “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”* God revealed to Peter through a vision his acceptance of the gentiles. Through the vision, it was very clear that the gentiles do not need to be converted into Jews to be accepted by God, but by his grace and wisdom, God accepted the Gentiles. God made the vision much clearer by sending Peter to a Centurion to preach the gospel of Jesus alone, where God marvelously revealed his grace and acceptance of the Gentiles. And today Peter reminded the council of this great work that God had done. Let us look at **verse 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. 9 He did not discriminate between us and them, for he purified their hearts by faith.”* Only by faith, God purified the hearts of the gentiles. When the Gentiles accepted the Gospel by faith, the blood of Jesus purified their hearts and God granted them the Holy Spirit just as he did to the Jewish believers and the apostles. God in his mercy and grace, accepted the gentiles and blessed them with the gift of the Holy Spirit, they did not have to be converted into Jews first or fulfill the Jewish customs and laws, but only believing in the grace, God saved them and granted them the gift of the Holy Spirit.

After saying this, Peter concluded in **verse 10-11** saying: *“Now then, why do you try to test God by putting on the necks of Gentiles a yoke that neither we nor our ancestors have been able to bear? 11 No! We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved, just as they are.”* Here Peter revealed that it is impossible to earn salvation by works, because of sin no men can fulfill the law completely, one way or the other one will fall short. Yes, God gave the Jews the law of Moses, which they fell short to fulfill. God’s wisdom in giving them the law was to make them realize how much they need God, to make them realize that without the grace of God they can do nothing. From generation to generation, the Jews failed to fulfill the law. But because of God’s love, he sent his one and only Son Jesus Christ, a lamb without blemish to die on the cross for the sins of all mankind. Through Jesus, God poured out his grace to us the Gentiles, and in the same way to the Jews too. In the key verse Peter said: *“We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved, just as they are.”*

When Peter and the other apostles realized this grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, something changed in them. Peter for one, before meeting Jesus he was a fisherman who just lived his own self-centered life of fishing. And by grace alone, Jesus Christ came to him and called him to be a fisher of men, to be a heir in the kingdom of heaven. Peter himself testified how undeserving he was in **Luke 5:8** saying to Jesus: *“Go away from me, Lord; I am a sinful man!”* But by the grace of Jesus, he was saved and called to be a disciple of Jesus Christ. Because of the grace of Jesus Christ, Peter could be used mightily, and so was Paul and Barnabas. Because of the grace of Jesus Christ, they could see the gentiles differently and could bring them to the faith in great numbers and raised them as dedicated disciples of Jesus. Furthermore, in **verse 12** it says: *“The whole assembly became silent as they listened to Barnabas and Paul talking about the signs and wonders God had done among the Gentiles through them.”* The work of God amongst the gentiles was undoubtedly magnificent, it moved the whole assembly leaving everyone silent as Barnabas and Paul spoke about the signs and wonders God had done among the gentiles.

Paul and Barnabas could bring many gentiles to God by preaching the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, only because of the grace the people could be transformed into believers, into disciples of Jesus who dedicated their lives to the mission of God. The Church of Antioch could be raised as a missionary sending center when Paul and Barnabas preached the message of the grace of God. Indeed, the message of the grace of God has power, power to transform even immoral people of the city of Antioch into great disciples of Jesus. The message of the grace of Jesus has power to transform campus students, into great disciples of Jesus, it has power to transform our lives from uselessness into fulfilling lives with meaning and purpose.

Yesterday when I was busy preparing the message, my brother called me and told me he and my father were having some conflict. This is not something new, for a very long my brother has somewhat appeared to be a troublemaker, I tried many things to help him to such an extent that I just got tired and decided to just leave him. However yesterday, the word of God challenged me to reflect on how exactly did I try to help my brother. When I looked back, I realized that mostly I used my own efforts and ideas as a way to help, yes it was out of love, but it was just my own ideas, influenced by world standards and concepts. I focused mainly on telling him to quit alcohol, to be respectful, to be disciplined and find a job etc. Like all people, what my brother needs, is to hear the gospel message of the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ. My brother's main problem is sin, my father too, me too, the main problem is sin and our hearts are yearning to hear and receive the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ and be saved. I pray that I may repent and prioritize Jesus over my own thinking and ideas.

After Peter had said much concerning the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, and after the testimony by Paul and Barnabas concerning the great work of God amongst the gentiles. James, the brother of the Lord and Chairman of the council of the church in Jerusalem stood up and acknowledged that indeed Gentiles do not need to be converted into Jews. But rather God in his own wisdom has intervened to choose a people for his name from the Gentiles. The Gentiles do not have to fulfill the Jewish laws to be saved. In his final Judgement, James pointed out that though as Christian believers we are not bound by the law, we should not however be reckless. And so, through James' recommendation in **verse 28-29** the church in Jerusalem responded to the question of circumcision and the law of Moses by writing to the Gentile believers in Antioch, Syria and Cilicia saying: *“It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us not to burden you with anything beyond the following requirements: 29 You are to abstain from food sacrificed to idols, from blood, from the meat of strangled animals and from sexual immorality. You will do well to avoid these things.”* When gentile believers received this news, they were very glad and were encouraged by the message.

Conclusion

From today's passage, we have learnt that the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ alone is sufficient to save me, you, my brother and any soul in this world, The Grace of Jesus has power to transform any soul, regardless of background, race, gender whatsoever into great disciples of Jesus Christ. When we believe this Gospel, God forgives our sins, purifies our hearts, and gives us the Holy Spirit, which empowers us to overcome sin, and enables us to spread the gospel to the ends of the world. May God help us to overcome the temptation that we can do something to earn salvation, the temptation that there is something we need to do before we and others can be saved by Jesus.

Furthermore, we have learnt that as Christian believers saved by the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, we should not be reckless and compromise our faith by living in sin, saying we are saved by the grace. As Christian believers we should always be cautious towards sin, abstain from the worthless things of this world and live life daily depending on Jesus Christ alone.