

THE COUNCIL AT JERUSALEM

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.”

Today’s passage describes the first church council held in Jerusalem around 50 A.D. It convened to consider the issue of circumcision—whether the Gentiles should be circumcised before they could be saved. It was a very important issue involving the core of the gospel. The council’s decision was based on the word of God and it was clear. Everyone is saved by faith in Jesus alone. It is by God’s grace alone. Salvation is the work of God. It is not what we do but what God does. May God help us to be very clear about the grace of salvation!

I. JESUS PLUS SOMETHING ELSE? (1-5)

The believers in the Antioch church must have been very happy to hear the report of the first missionary journey by Paul and Barnabas. They must have put the maps of Galatia on the walls of their houses and marked the cities Paul and Barnabas had visited with red dots. Perhaps they prayed everyday for the new believers in Pisidian Antioch, Iconium, Lystra and Derbe, calling each person by name. Some were probably inspired to go out as missionaries to other parts of the Roman world. However, before the gospel continued its advance, an important issue arose that needed to be resolved by the church.

Look at verse 1. *Certain people came down from Judea to Antioch and were teaching the believers: “Unless you are circumcised, according to the custom taught by Moses, you cannot be saved.”* We should know that to be circumcised meant more than simple surgical procedure on a body part. It meant to be converted to Judaism, to commit oneself to observe the Jewish laws—all 613 commandments (248 do’s and 365 don’ts). The Gentile believers in Antioch had simply accepted the good news of Jesus Christ. They believed that Jesus died on the cross to wash away their sins. They believed that Jesus rose from the dead on the third day to be the firstfruit of their own resurrection. They knew in their hearts that their sins were forgiven and they had a living hope in the kingdom of God. Then the Holy Spirit came upon them to confirm their faith. They were filled with joy because they were accepted into God’s family. They were children of God! They were so happy that they shouted, “Hallelujah! Praise the Lord!”

Then some men came from Jerusalem and tried to take away their joy. They told the believers that faith in Jesus was not enough. They said, “Unless you are circumcised, you cannot be saved.” Paul and Barnabas were alarmed. They had heated discussions with them. This was a false teaching that could damage the work of God. Paul and Barnabas told them emphatically that there is no prerequisite for salvation. There is no Jesus plus alpha. But the issue could not be resolved locally in Antioch. It had to be

settled in Jerusalem, where the problem originated. 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 (2).

The church sent them on their way. They had to travel some 300 miles, but they were not burdened by the task. They welcomed the opportunity to share with other believers what God had done among the Gentiles. As they traveled through Phoenicia and Samaria, they told everyone how the Gentiles had been converted. This news made all the believers very glad (3). The ordinary Jewish Christians could see that it was the Holy Spirit who was working among the Gentiles. They were happy to see that God was expanding his kingdom to the Gentile world.

When they arrived in Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the church. The apostles and elders gathered together to greet them with a welcome sign and flowers. Paul and Barnabas began to share with them what God had done among the Gentiles. They told them about the fruitful ministry in Antioch, where many disciples were ready to go out as missionaries to the Roman world. They gave a detailed report about their first mission journey—how the Roman governor in Cyprus became a believer, how the entire city population of Pisidian Antioch showed up to hear the good news of Jesus Christ, and how new churches were planted in remote places like Iconium, Lystra and Derbe.

As Paul and Barnabas gave their joyful and powerful mission report, there was tension in the air. There was an elephant in the room. They had to settle the issue of circumcision. There would be no spiritual unity until the issue was resolved. As expected, 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” (5). Essentially, they argued that faith in Jesus was not enough. Gentiles must become Jews before they could be Christians. This sounds strange to our ears today. But remember that the believers at that time did not have the Holy Scriptures like the book of Romans to guide them. The law of Moses had been the way of life for the Jewish people for thousands of years. What was the big deal to ask the Gentiles to do the same? The big deal is that God’s grace would become cheap grace when such human condition is attached to it.

Is there a modern parallel today to the claim of the Jewish people? Do people still argue for Jesus plus alpha? I think so. Some people might say to you, “Unless you are baptized in my church, you cannot be saved,” or “Receiving the Eucharist is necessary for your salvation.” Actually, many people feel more comfortable if they could do something to contribute to their salvation. Faith in Jesus seems too simple to them. They may ask: “Do you mean that all I have to do is to believe in Jesus? How can all my terrible sins be forgiven just like that?” So why did God make salvation so simple? Why didn’t he set up a minimum requirement to be qualified for salvation? Why didn’t he say that we must keep at the minimum the Ten Commandments? (As God’s people, we should keep the commandments, but they are not a requirement for salvation.) It is because, if we could contribute to our salvation even 1%, we would become proud before him, which takes us back to the original sin—pride. In his infinite wisdom and love, God,

who knows each of us so well, sent his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life (Jn 3:16)

During the Korean War in the early 1950s, an American GI was driving a jeep on a country road when he saw a woman carrying a heavy basket on her head. He stopped to offer her a ride. Once in the car, however, she would not put the basket down. When asked why, she answered, “It is enough for you to give me a ride. How can I ask you to carry my basket as well?” Those who insist on Jesus plus alpha are like this woman. Jesus paid the full price of our sins when he died on the cross. On the cross, he said, “It is finished” (Jn 19:30). We make light of his sacrifice when we add extra conditions for salvation.

II. BY GOD’S GRACE ALONE (6-11)

So how did the church leaders resolve the important issue of circumcision? Look at verse 6. *The apostles and elders met to consider this question.* They had a long discussion (7a). Everyone had a chance to speak their mind. It took a long time, perhaps several days, but it was good for the leaders to consider the issue together, given its serious nature. Luke does not tell us about the details of their discussion. He simply reports that they met to consider the question and they had much discussion.

Finally, Peter got up to address the council. As the top disciple of Jesus, Peter could have spoken with an air of authority. But he did not. After letting everyone else speak first, Peter got up to make several points.

First, God accepted the Gentiles. Who can go against him? 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.”* In Acts chapter 10, we learned how God helped Peter to overcome his prejudice against the Gentiles. He led Peter to the Roman centurion named Cornelius. For the first time in his life, Peter entered a Gentile person’s house against the Jewish custom. He preached the gospel of Jesus to a group of people gathered there. Then he witnessed a remarkable thing. The Holy Spirit came upon the Gentile believers! They praised God, speaking in tongues. Through that event, God taught Peter to accept the Gentiles as his brothers and sisters. Peter testified: “I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism but accepts from every nation the one who fears him and does what is right” (10:34-35). God accepted the Gentiles. So Peter accepted the Gentiles. His point was simple and powerful. God gave the Holy Spirit to the Gentiles when they accepted the good news of Jesus Christ in their hearts. They were baptized by the Holy Spirit. God accepted them into his family. The Holy Spirit came on the Gentiles when none of them were circumcised. Circumcision was not necessary for them to be saved. To say otherwise was to go against God.

Second, God sees the heart of a person. 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 did not discriminate between us and them, for he purified their hearts by faith.”*

A person's heart is important. People see outside of a person. But God sees the heart of a person. Peter experienced this first hand. The Lord saved him, not because he was circumcised, but because he opened his heart to the word of God. The Pharisees and Sadducees were much more religious than Peter. They looked holy outwardly. Peter was a smelly fisherman. But Jesus called Peter to be his disciple because he had a humble, open heart.

The problem with the Gentiles was not their strange appearance or eating habits. It was their hearts. Sin was in their hearts. Then something happened to their hearts when they accepted Jesus as their Savior. The Holy Spirit purified their hearts. God "cleansed their hearts through faith" (9; NLT). They were changed from the inside out. They were made anew. They were made pure before the holy God. Now they could approach the holy God with confidence. They could worship God in spirit and in truth. They began to love and serve God with all their hearts. It was the work of the Holy Spirit in their hearts!

Third, don't put a yoke on them that we ourselves cannot bear. Look at verse 10. *"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?"* God had made it very clear that he accepted the Gentiles when they simply believed the gospel. To ignore this was to test God's patience, making him angry by refusing to believe what God had made clear. Peter reminded them that neither they nor their ancestors were able to keep all the laws 100%. In other words, no one can be saved from sin by observing the law perfectly, because no one is able to do it. The apostle Paul tried and tried, but he failed. He kept 9 of the 10 commandments perfectly, but he got stuck with the last one. He cried out, "What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body that is subject to death?" (Ro 7:24). Then he met Jesus personally who saved him by his one-sided grace. He exclaimed, "Thanks be to God, who delivers me through Jesus Christ our Lord!" (Ro 7:25)

Fourth, only by the grace of God. Let us read verse 11 together. *"No! We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved, just as they are."* Peter declared that we are saved through the grace of our Lord Jesus. Peter knew that he himself was saved by God's grace alone. He was just an ordinary fisherman. He could have spent his whole life chasing fish across the Sea of Galilee, and then died in sin, destined for eternal condemnation. But Jesus had mercy on him. He visited him at the shore one morning, after Peter had a miserable night shift with no catch of fish. Jesus told him, "Put out into deep water, and let down the nets for a catch." When Peter obeyed, he caught such a large number of fish that their nets began to break. Then Peter realized who Jesus was and who he was. He said, "Go away from me, Lord; I am a sinful man!" (Lk 5:8) Jesus said to him, "Don't be afraid; from now on you will fish for people." Peter left everything and followed Jesus. Jesus raised him to be a man of faith. Finally, Jesus died on the cross as the Lamb of God who takes the sin of the world. Later Peter wrote, "He himself bore our sins" in his body on the cross, 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 saved by the grace of Jesus Christ alone.

Likewise, the Jews were saved by God's grace alone. The Gentiles were saved by God's grace alone. We are saved by God's grace alone. We have five Solas: *Sola Gratia*—saved by grace alone; *Sola Fide*—through faith alone; *Solus Christus*—in Christ alone; *Sola Scriptura*—according to the Scripture alone; and *Soli Deo Gloria*—for the glory of God alone. The Apostle Paul says in Ephesians 2:8-9, “For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast.” God saved us by his grace alone. By definition, grace is a gift—it is not something we can earn. When we realize this, our response to him is to praise him, thank him, and live for his glory for the rest of our lives.

III. A DECISION BASED ON THE SCRIPTURES (12-35)

Who got up to speak to the council after Peter's powerful testimony? Barnabas and Paul shared the work of God among the Gentiles. Look at verse 12. *The whole assembly became silent as they listened to Barnabas and Paul telling about the signs and wonders God had done among the Gentiles through them.* Luke does not record the content of their stories, because he already told us the details of their first missionary journey in chapters 13 and 14. Their mission report was so fascinating and heart-moving that the whole assembly became quiet. We have a similar experience at the International Bible conference when we listen to the heart-moving testimonies and mission reports.

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 (12:17). How did he help the council to reach a sound conclusion?

James began by recognizing Peter's testimony about how God accepted the Gentiles for his name (14). Then he quoted the words of the prophets (Amos 9:11-12; Isa 45:21) to show that this was consistent with the Scriptures: “*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'-- things known from long ago*” (16-18). The Old Testament prophets predicted what was happening to the Gentile believers. James recognized the word of God as the final authority. The council's decision was not made by a majority vote. The answer came from the Scriptures.

Look at verse 19. “*It is my judgment, therefore, that we should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God.*” This was the verdict. They should not burden the Gentiles by requiring them to be circumcised. Instead, they should accept the Gentiles into their community as their brothers and sisters. In this way, the issue of circumcision—which evoked passion in the hearts of many--was settled. Now all believers, both Jews and Gentiles, could be united in Christ.

James had some instructions for the Gentiles to live as God's people. 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."* These were not requirements for salvation. These were instructions to live as a holy people. For the Jews and the Gentiles to live in harmony in a loving community, the Gentiles had to give up their immoral and disgusting way of life. Especially they had to watch what they were eating. If a Gentile Christian served a pig roast to his Jewish Christian friend, the dinner fellowship would not go well for sure.

The apostles and elders drafted a letter to the Gentile churches to inform their decision. They chose two leaders, Judas and Silas, to deliver in person the decision of the council. They treated the Gentile believers with genuine respect and love. They reached out to the Gentile believers to embrace them, explaining that the circumcision party had gone out without their authorization. The key point of the letter was that the mother church welcomed all Gentile believers into their community. As the Antioch church members read the letter, they were filled with great joy because of its encouraging message (31). They were also 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 conclusion, we are saved by God's grace alone. It is not by anything we have done. When we believe in Jesus, the Holy Spirit purifies our hearts. We are accepted to God's family by his grace alone. This grace makes us humble and thankful to God. May God help us to accept the grace of God in our hearts and live a victorious life of faith!